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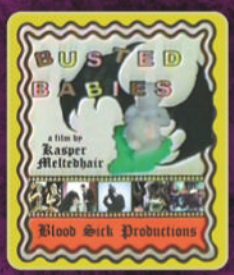

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RUE MORGUE
MARCH/APRIL 2026 #229

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A nerve-shredding found-footage thriller built around sound, *Undertone* signals the arrival of a terrifying new voice in Canada's booming independent horror scene.
PLUS! Meet the new breed of independent Canadian horror filmmakers behind *Dream Eater*, *Sweetness*, *Hangashore*, and *The Curse of Ghost Island*.
by **ANDREA SUBISSATI**, **LENA REID**, **MAGILL FOOTE**, **NOVA NOX** and **BENOIT BLACK**

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by **NOVA NOX** and **STACIE PONDER**

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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

Welcome to the March/April issue, fiends. By the time this baby hits stands, it'll be spring – that magical time of year where all the frozen dogshit in my yard thaws to a nice smelly caca confit, and I might catch a minute of sun after my office hours. If I sound a tad grumpy, it's because I'm writing this on an especially frigid day of winter, and Toronto is currently experiencing the gnarliest season it's had in years. Record-breaking cold plus record-breaking snowfall equals record-breaking seasonal affective disorder and I'm pretty close to going full Jack-Torrance-in-a-black-turtleneck about it.

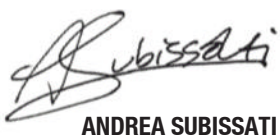
Anyway, enough of that. My task at hand gives nary a frig about my mental health nor my seasonal preferences, so let's get to some horror business. First, it's my dismal duty to inform you that longtime *Rue Morgue* contributor and collectibles expert James Burrell is retiring his Cryptic Collectibles column, effective this issue. James has been a beloved member of the Rue Crew for almost two decades, and his knowledge and appreciation of vintage horror memorabilia and Canadian horror, in particular, is something we've exploited ad nauseum but never taken for granted. If you happen to catch him in the wild, take him to a karaoke bar – you're in for a treat. Thanks for everything, James.

In other housekeeping news, the backstage brass here at *Rue Morgue* has been working hard on securing more convention gigs for 2026. You might have noticed we've been ramping up our travel itinerary lately and may have wondered why on earth this Canadian mag would book more appearances in the U.S., given the political climate. I'd like to address that, if I may, because there are those who are mighty critical of Canucks travelling south on holiday to spend our hard-earned (if decidedly less valuable) CAD in a country teetering on the brink of collapse.

I get that, friends. It's late-stage capitalism, and we vote with our dollars just as much as our election ballots. But if I've learned anything from my American business trips last year, it's that there are a lot of good people suffering right now, taking to the streets to fight for rights and freedoms that should never need defending in this day and age. I'm just a horror fan who landed a sweet gig – I'm not a celebrity or a political figure or anyone of any consequence in that regard. But as a human being with a pulse and something of a platform, I will not summarily abandon my American readers and fans who need horror now more than ever.

I went to Bangor, Maine, last year and every Uber driver who discovered I was Canadian thanked me heartily for not punishing their tourism industry because of what's going on further south. I went to Spooky Empire in Orlando and attended a drag show at a time when LGBTQ2S+ gatherings are genuine acts of resistance. I met friends and fans who told me that *Rue Morgue* or *The Faculty of Horror* is helping to get them through these terrifying times. I was moved, again and again, at the extent to which horror fandom unites people in a time where everything else divides us.

I keep seeing this Henry Rollins quote popping up on my social media feed, something along the lines of how punk rockers mustn't be dismayed right now, and that this is the sort of time Joe Strummer trained you for. To my horror fam, near and far: this is what *Night of the Living Dead* trained you for. Look out for each other. Bear witness, and never give up hope. I'll keep showing up as long as you do.



ANDREA SUBISSATI
andrea@rue-morgue.com

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RUE MORGUE

MARRS MEDIA INC. RUE-MORGUE.COM
17 WILLINGDON BLVD. ETOBICOKE, ONTARIO, M8X 2H1, CANADA
PH: 416.651.9675 FAX: 416.651.6085 EMAIL: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM
FB: RUEMORGUEMAGAZINE IG: @RUEMORGUEMAG BSKY: @RUEMORGUEMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

STAFF

PUBLISHER
RODRIGO GUDIÑO

EXECUTIVE EDITOR
ANDREA SUBISSATI

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
MONICA S. KUEBLER

MUSIC EDITOR
AARON VON LUPTON

ART DIRECTOR
SHANE MILLS

STAFF WRITER
SEAN PLUMMER

OPERATIONS MANAGER
PATRICIA DAMEN

HEAD ONLINE WRITER
MICHAEL GINGOLD

MANAGING ONLINE EDITOR
WILLIAM J. WRIGHT

ASSISTANT ONLINE EDITOR
OLIVIA WRIGHT

FINANCIAL CONTROLLER
MARCO PECOTA

DIGITAL MARKETING MANAGER
KEVIN HOOVER

INTERNS
JULIAN ARWEN
KENNEDY CAST
LAURA HOKSTAD

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER
YASMINA KETITA

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING & ADVERTISING
JODY INFURNARI
PH: 905-985-0430 **E:** jody@rue-morgue.com

CONTRIBUTORS

BENOIT BLACK
JOHN W. BOWEN
JESSICA BUCK
JAMES BURRELL
PEDRO CABEZUELO
BRYAN CHRISTOPHER
ADAM CLARKE
JAY CLARKE
DEIRDRE CRIMMINS
ALEX DELLER
S. ELIZABETH
LOUIS FLETCHER
MAGILL FOOTE
DR. BENNY GRAVES
LAST CHANCE LANCE
PAYTON MCCARTY-SIMAS
RACHEL MEGHAN
NOVA NOX
DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ
STACIE PONDER
LENA REID
PAIGE REYNOLDS
KARL RICHTER
JEFF SZPIRGLAS
OWEN WILLIAMS

RUE MORGUE #229 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of The Birthday Massacre, Wednesday 13, Lord of the Lost, Kate McEdwards, MaiPai, and Al McMullan.

Cover: *Undertone*
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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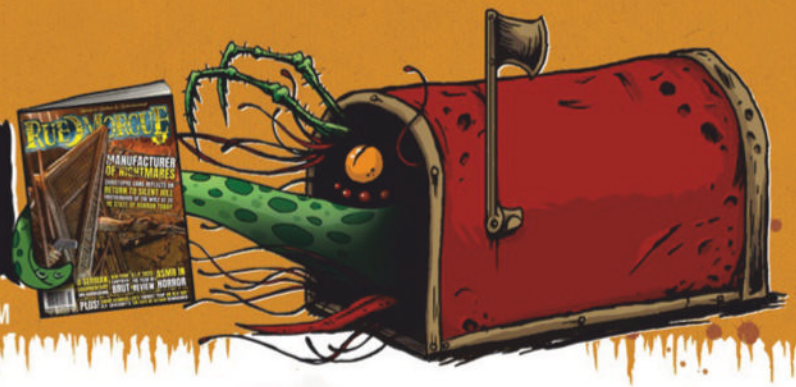
POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM



IT WAS GENUINELY GREAT to see Christophe Gans finally given the cover story treatment in the new issue (*RM#228*). That said, I walked away from *Return to Silent Hill* feeling deeply disappointed and honestly confused about what the film was even trying to say or be. It unfortunately fell into the same familiar trap that so many video game adaptations do: muddled storytelling and an overall lack of coherence. It's frustrating to see a director of his calibre stumble into that pattern. I can only hope his next film returns to the level that once made his work so exciting.

WILLIAM P., VIA EMAIL

I'VE BEEN A SUBSCRIBER to *Rue Morgue* magazine for many years. It is, hands down, the best genre publication out there. I wanted to commend you for all your outstanding work with the magazine and especially highlight the Short Cuts segments. The directors of these short films are the future of the horror genre, and bringing attention to their work will hopefully give them the chance to segue into features. There are so many great horror short films that few people ever get to see, and a write-up in *Rue Morgue* is giving them an opportunity to shine. Thank you for championing the future masters of horror.

SEAN GERACE, VIA EMAIL

JUST WANTED TO SAY thanks for being a highly anticipated monthly/bi-monthly part of my life for 25-plus years. You've come so far from the early years of publication. The content has been consistently excellent and ever evolving. Columns and writers come and go… which sometimes drives me a bit batty. Classic Cuts was my go-to every issue. VS not so much. But hey… each copy makes my day when it arrives.

DWAIN WORONIUK – ADDRESS WITHHELD

I USED TO BE ABLE to purchase the odd copy of *Rue Morgue* now and then at places like Barnes and Noble but haven't seen it on the shelves in quite a while. Well, in any case, I have been reading since your fourth issue and still think your magazine is the very best. I used to live in Rochester, New York, and travel to Toronto frequently so *Rue Morgue* never felt far away as it seems to now. Everyone there does an amazing job with the email communications and all the other things I don't tune in for (still love the physical media). I have quite a vintage magazine collection which is actually gathering mould right now (so damp in the Pacific Northwest). Thanks again for reading this and for all that you do!

MELISSA MEDICK, VIA EMAIL

IT'S A HAPPY DAY when the daughter discovers your *Rue Morgue* collection. I knew saving these for the past 23 years would make sense one day....

@THELOSTBOYS_BAR VIA INSTAGRAM

I ACTUALLY MEANT TO WRITE I actually meant to write to you all a while ago about the article you did on Steven Spielberg's lost horror movie, *Something Evil*. I had never even heard of this movie before reading your coverage, and that really shocked me. Spielberg has always been my favourite film director, and I always thought I knew everything about his work. Ever since I read your piece, I've been pretty much obsessed with trying to track it down and watch it for myself. I was just wondering if you might have any idea where someone like me could actually find this film, if it's available anywhere at all.

GREG MCINTYRE, VIA EMAIL

You might find region-coded DVD listings in online marketplaces such as eBay, and/or full uploads occasionally posted on YouTube from archival recordings of old TV airings. In both cases, quality will vary. -Ed

BIG FAN of *Rue Morgue* from Waterloo, Ontario! I wanted to let you all know how much I appreciate the plug for Last Exit Radio in the Jan/Feb 2026 issue. I was immediately intrigued by the profile and, since reading it a few days ago, I've been listening to Last Exit Radio nonstop. The variety of '80s/'90s/2000s rock is fab. Thank you for giving me my newest obsession.

VIRGINIA L. SHAY, VIA EMAIL

THE ARTICLE "The Lost Horror Films of Lon Chaney" (*RM#227*) breaks my heart. Nitrate film is so dangerous and can ignite and spread quickly. Not only have we lost some of Lon Chaney's films, but we have lost tons of films and music in other horrible incidents, like the 1965 MGM vault fire, the 1937 Fox vault fire, the 1978 National Archives fire, and the George Eastman House fire. So much creative work has been destroyed. This has been happening since ancient times, like the fire that consumed the creative works at the Library of Alexandria. Even though the film *London After Midnight* was destroyed, it still lives on in "light form" somewhere in outer space. Energy cannot be destroyed and this lost film with Lon Chaney was projected onto a silver screen, the light that was projected still exists. Even though we can't see this movie, it still survives.

PAUL DALE ROBERTS, FORMER FIREFIGHTER FOR CAL-FIRE, VIA EMAIL

CORRECTION: *In our Blood in Four Colours column in* RM#228*, we mistakenly credited Bruce Brown as a co-writer of* The Cats of Ulthar. *He is, in fact, the sole writer.* Rue Morgue *regrets the error.*

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE # 229

The first horror movie remake was George Méliès' 1897 film *The Haunted Castle*, a redo of his own *House of the Devil* released one year earlier.

Athazagoraphobia is described as a fear of forgetting or being forgotten.

Paul Bateson, a hospital worker who appeared in *The Exorcist*, was later found guilty of murder and was also suspected of killing half a dozen other Manhattan residents. William Friedkin's 1980 film *Cruising* was partially inspired by this story.

Kevin Williamson wrote the screenplay for *Scream* after viewing a documentary about Danny Rolling, a.k.a. The Gainesville Ripper.

Male chicks are of no use to the egg industry, so they are either suffocated with carbon monoxide or instantly ground up by a special device called a macerator within a day of birth.

On Belgian late-night TV in 2005, *The Smurfs* appeared in a UNICEF commercial where their happy village is bombed and left devastated, followed by a plea for donations for the war-torn country of Burundi.

For *Critters 2*, director Mick Garris couldn't afford to hire the actor he wanted to voice the Crites, so he ended up doing most of them himself.

The deadliest train wreck in history occurred in Sri Lanka in 2004 when the Indian Ocean tsunami swept away an overcrowded train carrying around 1700 people.

According to director Roger Watkins, $2200 of the $3000 budget for his 1977 film *The Last House on Dead End Street* was used to buy drugs.

Indonesian serial killer Ahmad Suradji was executed in 2008 for killing upwards of 42 women. He buried their bodies up to their necks facing his house in a ritual he believed would give him magical powers.

For his role in *Beetlejuice*, Michael Keaton drew inspiration from Bill Moseley's portrayal of Chop-Top in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*.

Poland's Skull Chapel is a centuries-old structure lined with some 3000 skulls, with countless more bones to be found in the basement beneath.

In July 2025, a teddy bear that appeared to be made from human flesh was discovered outside a California gas station. It was tested and found to be fake, and the prankster was subsequently tracked down and arrested.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT?
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EXPIRING MINDS...

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

What horror movie mythos is deserving of its own religion?

Beyond the Black Rainbow.
CODY NASH, VIA FACEBOOK

The Egyptian cult (led by none other than Gunnar Hansen) in *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*.
TYLER FLETCHER, VIA FACEBOOK

In Fabric for the sheer (pun intended) absurdity of worshipping a killer red dress.
@BLLYDDPAETWR, VIA INSTAGRAM

Psychoplasmics (*The Brood*) but it was more of a therapeutic method.
RYAN MCFARLANE, VIA FACEBOOK

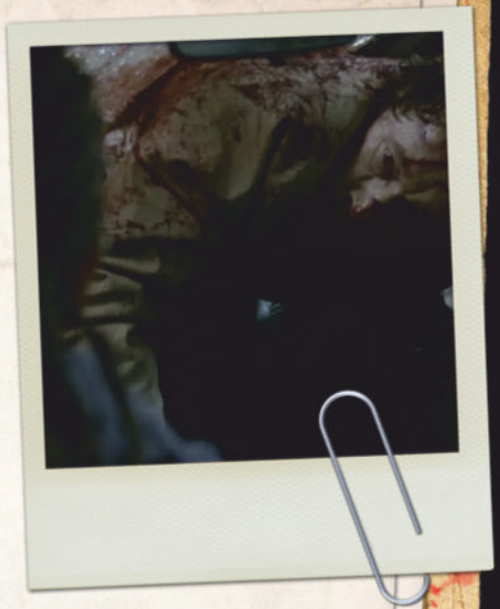
Not a movie but Netflix's cancelled *Archive 81*. There was so much potential there.
MICHELLE COTE, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS
AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

"ROGER CORMAN'S *E.T.* KNOCKOFF HAS BEEN FOUND."

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
JOSHUA MATTHEW BLEVINS, VIA FACEBOOK
Follow us on Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram for a chance to have your Final Words!

BETWEEN A CAR AND A HARD PLACE



You've probably heard this story before: a woman is driving home drunk and high and winds up hitting a pedestrian, rendering him wedged painfully in her windshield. Fearing jail time, she neglects to alert the authorities and simply drives home, leaving her car (and her dying victim) parked in the garage. Depending on your media of choice, you might have seen this morbid urban legend played out in any number of TV shows and movies, including episodes of *CSI*, *Fargo*, and *Law & Order*, or possibly the 2018 film *Midnighters*. But odds are, since you're reading this magazine, you most likely saw Stuart Gordon's pitch-black horror comedy *Stuck* with Mena Suvari as Brandi and Stephen Rea as the extremely unlucky Tom.

The real story occurred in late October of 2001, when Chante Jawan Mallard, a 25-year-old nurse's aide in Fort Worth, Texas, was driving home while high on a combination of ecstasy, pot, and alcohol. The man she hit was 37-year-old Gregory Glenn Biggs, who reportedly pleaded with Mallard to help him when she checked up on him and even apologized to him in the hours following the incident. When Biggs eventually did succumb to his injuries and died alone and in agony, Mallard recruited two friends to help her move the body and the car to a local park where they set it on fire to destroy any evidence. Eventually, Mallard's own loose lips would be her downfall as she told people about her misdeeds at a party several months later. She got reported, arrested, and found guilty of murder. She's currently serving a 50-year sentence in Gatesville, Texas, and her friends served time for evidence tampering.

Iterations of this story are many, possibly because the real-life tale is tragic enough to make us question if human empathy is even a thing. But Gordon's film takes pains to give some perspective to a story that the public was eager to write off as another tragic headline. Screenwriter John Strysik explained that he wanted the audience to feel for both Tom and Brandi, giving a sense that he had some empathy for Mallard as well.

After all, while we can agree that Mallard's actions over the course of those few days were downright ghoulish, we don't know what kind of person she is outside of that. And what's more, maybe the scariest thought is that none of us can know with 100 percent certainty how we'd react in a similar situation (a certain cinematic high schooler who left his little sister's headless corpse to sit in the back seat of his minivan for his mom to discover comes to mind). So be safe out on those roads, folks! There are worse things out there than black ice.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Cristina Galbó, "Teresa Garan" from *The House That Screamed* (1969)

As the put-upon Teresa Garan, teen actress Cristina Galbó was fortunate not only to star in a film that enjoyed incredible domestic success but also constituted an attempt by filmmakers in Franco's Spain to break into the international exploitation market. In the same year, she married sweetheart and fellow actor Peter Lee Lawrence, and the 1970s saw her star in prominent *giallo* thrillers *What Have You Done to Solange?* and *The Killer Must Kill Again*. However, she is perhaps best known for her leading role in eccentric zombie flick *Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (1974, a.k.a. *Let Sleeping Corpses Lie*), the film Galbó made in the months immediately following Lawrence's death from a brain tumour. Though she continued to work regularly after this tragedy, the actress would eventually retire from the film business at just 38 years of age, reportedly establishing a talent agency in her home city of Madrid before becoming a flamenco dance teacher.

LOUIS FLETCHER

NEEDFUL THINGS

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Activated with charcoal so it suds black (but won't tint your hair), this goth shampoo in a coffin bottle will turn your hair care routine into an unholy ritual. A collab between VampireFreaks and Haunted Hair, this charcoal shampoo is suitable for all hair types. Its warm, coffee scent will help shake off the morning cobwebs.

Vampirefreaks.com

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Now that the '90s are officially nostalgia-worthy, leave it to the mad minds at Trick Or Treat Studios to give the micro-toy playset the horror collectible treatment with one of the most iconic franchises the genre has ever seen. This Micro Maniacs playset includes Laurie, Dr. Loomis, and The Shape in a 4-inch pumpkin compact, ready for you to recreate your favourite scenes in miniature. Pre-orders ship this spring!

Trickortreatstudios.com

3 LITTLE ONDINE X JUNJI ITO MANIAC COLLECTION

$84.99 USD

Junji Ito's famous succubus finally gets a cosmetics collab with Shanghai-based Little Ondine, offering products and packaging inspired by the body-horror manga *Tomie*. The full line, available in a deluxe gift box, includes blush, lip clay, mascara, and eyeliner – all designed to make your blood run cold.

Lookhealthystore.com

4 EVIL RAY SPF 50+ SUNSCREEN

$35 USD

Finally! A sunscreen brand that acknowledges what we've known all along – that the sun is actively trying to kill us all and any protection below SPF 50 is like bringing melanoma to a knife fight. Defend your deathly pallor against the accursed sunlight with Evil Ray… vampire approved!

Evilray.com

5 FASCINATOR GHOUL RING

$50 USD

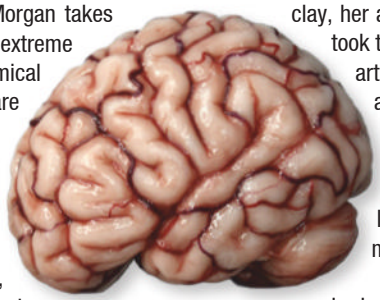
Ah, the delicious irony of buying officially licensed merch for a film that explicitly admonishes against the insidious brainwashing mechanisms of consumerism. Lean into it with this statement ring inspired by John Carpenter's immortal classic, hand designed in L.A. and cast in surgical stainless steel. It'll come in extra handy should you find yourself in a full-on six-minute street fight. OBEY!

HanCholo.com

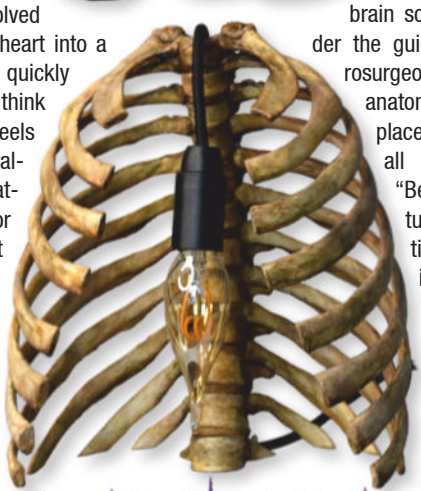
HANDMADE HORRORS

DECORATIVE HEART ACCESSORIES BY IRA MORGAN FX

Heart-shaped jewellery, charms, and baubles have been popular since 14th-century Medieval Europe, symbolizing romantic love in all its innocence and simplicity. Today, Madrid-based sculptor and SFX artist Ira Morgan takes that trend to the extreme with ultrarealistic anatomical heart accessories that are sure to turn heads... and possibly stomachs.

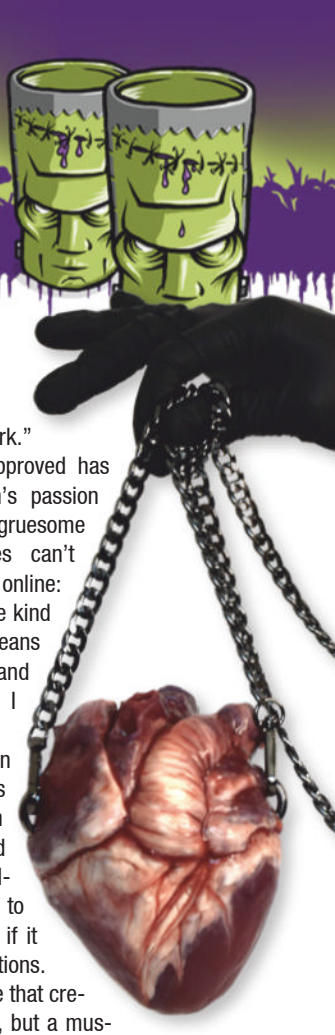


"They initially started as purely decorative objects meant to sit on a shelf," explains Morgan over email, "but the concept evolved when I transformed the heart into a wearable bag. That piece quickly became my bestseller. I think it resonates because it feels strikingly alive and naturalistic, instantly drawing attention. For fans of horror and alternative fashion, it becomes more than an accessory, it's a statement piece and something truly unique to have in their wardrobe."



Having trained as a makeup and SFX artist in Russia before being forced to pivot due to the pandemic, Morgan began her online shop selling wearable elf ears and small monster magnets before branching into larger, more complex sculptural work. Working primarily with silicone and sculpting clay, her anatomical heart accessories took the internet by storm, and the artist soon found herself creating items as anatomically faithful as they are practical, such as witch-hand candle holders, ribcage desk lamps, and hyper realistic mounds of grey matter.

"From the beginning, [my brain sculpture] was created under the guidance of practicing neurosurgeons, who advised me on anatomical accuracy – from the placement of gyri to the overall structure," she reveals. "Because of this, the piece turned out extremely realistic, and I often receive positive feedback from doctors, medical university lecturers, and educators. That kind of response is especially meaningful to me and confirms the value of precision in my work."



Being physician-approved has only ignited Morgan's passion for creating items so gruesome that she sometimes can't even promote them online: "I take it as a strange kind of compliment – it means the work looks real, and that is exactly what I aim for."

Beyond her legion of fans and followers worldwide, Morgan offers inspiration and encouragement to fellow artisans seeking to find their path, even if it leads in morbid directions.

"I genuinely believe that creativity is not a talent, but a muscle," she says. "It can be developed through persistence, discipline, and experimentation. The result depends on how much effort you're willing to invest and how deeply you explore materials, techniques, and ideas. Creativity rarely works on the first attempt – it's a long process of trial, failure, and refinement. What we often call 'talent' is simply the visible outcome of consistent work over time."

LENA REID

CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

THE FOG NOVELIZATION

(Bantam Books; Corgi Books, 1980)

Following the release of 1978's *Halloween*, horror maestro John Carpenter signed a deal with production and distribution company Avco Embassy to make two more movies, the first being 1980's *The Fog*. The film tells of a California coastal town visited by the vengeful spirits of long-dead mariners who lost their lives 100 years earlier when their ship sank after being led into a trap by duplicitous townsfolk. Penned by acclaimed author Dennis Etchison (who, under the pen name Jack Martin, also wrote novelizations for *Halloween II* and *Videodrome*), the book elaborates on Carpenter and co-writer/producer Debra Hill's screenplay and makes some plot points less ambiguous (for instance, Etchison's ghostly seamen are targeting only the descendants of the original conspirators). Published in the U.S. by Bantam and by Corgi in the UK, each edition features different front cover art and photos on the back. Prices vary, with copies available on eBay and from various booksellers for between $50 and $100 apiece.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM

A NERVE-SHREDDING FOUND-FOOTAGE THRILLER BUILT AROUND SOUND, *UNDERTONE* SIGNALS THE ARRIVAL OF A TERRIFYING NEW VOICE IN CANADA'S BOOMING INDEPENDENT HORROR SCENE

HOMEGROWN HORROR

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

THEY SAY THAT HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS, AND THAT'S ESPECIALLY TRUE FOR THE RECENT SPATE OF CANADIAN INDIE FILMMAKERS keeping the horror love alive in the Great White North. From sleeper standouts such as *In a Violent Nature* and *Dark Match* to festival faves like *Red Rooms* and *Psycho Goreman*, Canada has ushered in a new generation of genre creatives who treat low budgets as challenges rather than obstacles. Heck, filmmaker Ian Tuason readily embraces it. The writer/director of *Undertone* (out March 13 from A24 after a record-breaking seven-figure bidding war) shot his entire debut feature in the house he inherited from his folks, and is the latest in a long line of promising talent coming out of Hollywood North, alongside *Hangashore*'s Justin Oakey, *Skinamarink*'s Kyle Edward Ball, and *Dream Eater*'s Jay Drakulic, Mallory Drumm, and Alex Lee Williams [see sidebars].

In *Undertone*, Nina Kiri (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Heretics*) plays Evy, one half of a paranormal podcast of the same name. While taking palliative care of her unresponsive elderly mother (Michèle Duquet), Evy continues to record the show remotely with her friend Justin (a disembodied Adam DiMarco). Each episode of *The Undertone* podcast features the pair evaluating some spooky-ooky online material and – as the show's resident skeptic – Evy's got a rational explanation for everything. But when an unknown listener submits a series of unsettling audio clips, her entire reality is shaken. From the eerily similar bumps in the big house at night to terrifying allusions to her own situation (her mom's favourite nursery rhyme playing backwards), Evy might have inadvertently invited something evil into her home – as real and undeniable as a resounding echo.

"WITH UNDERTONE, I JUST WANT TO SCARE [PEOPLE]. I WANT TO *TERRIFY*."

– WRITER/DIRECTOR IAN TUASON

Undertone realizes all the potential of a solid found-footage flick, where fuzzy audio clips provide nerve-shredding tension, and the strain to hear voices amid nursery rhymes played backwards creates a disorienting atmosphere of demonic possibility. Certain to go down in history as one of Canada's most successful horror debuts, *Undertone* promises great things to come from Tuason, who can add this instant hit to a long list of creative achievements, including winning a Watty Award for his 2016 online mystery novel *The Online Profile of a Serial Killer* and writing the 2023 novel *Everyone and No One* and narrating its audiobook. In fact, he's already lined up some major studio gigs for the future, including Paramount's next entry in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise.

Bump In The Night: *Writer/director Ian Tuason was inspired by fellow Canadian film* ***Pontypool*** *in crafting his audio nightmare.*

Rue Morgue caught up with Tuason on an especially frigid winter day in Ontario to talk about the state of Canadian indie filmmaking, keeping it cheap while keeping it real, and tapping the horrors of the homestead.

I understand* Undertone *started as a radio play.

When it started as a radio play, I wrote it like straight found footage. You know, a couple of podcast hosts, their last episode wasn't finished, one of the podcasters went missing and this was their last episode. I was going to release it in chunks, episodic. I had done a couple of podcasts that kind of read like audiobooks, but my intention was to read them [myself], so I went into my basement and I soundproofed the washroom there and I just read it. It was a sci-fi, and you know, I was trying to act. That didn't go well.

How did you end up turning it into a film?

I was going to hire a couple of actors to do it just as a radio play and then COVID happened and my parents got sick and I moved back home. I was sitting there and the idea [for a film] just came to me. It was when I was taking care of my mom and she was at the end of life; she had Alzheimer's and she started to think I was her dad. She started calling me "Papa." I was [seeing] her deteriorate and then I remembered this question I had all my life, which was why did *The Exorcist* scare me so much? And the reason that I came up with was that it took the safest place and the safest thing in the world and weaponized it – which was a daughter [in her own] home. And then I was always on the lookout for what's safer than that? And then your mom gets sick and you're caring for her and she's calling you dad. That's [as intimate as] you can get. When I looked at her, the wheels started turning. I started thinking about my radio play and I was paralleling the story.

Undertone *was shot in your actual family house?*

Yeah, this is where it's shot. Mama's bedroom [in the film] was where my mom died.

Is that her religious stuff in the film?

Yeah, it is. I was scared of it, because I grew up looking at these [religious] portraits. Depending if I felt like I was being a bad kid, I had dreams of going to the room and the portraits [being] upside down. I had one dream where Jesus was shaking his head [disapprovingly]. I was just like, well, that's Catholic guilt! And that's what I drew upon, too.

How much is Evy's character based on you?

I was recording podcasts while my mom was sick. So then I started to write a story about what does [a caregiver] do in between recording this podcast. You know, I had one location, so I had to figure out ways to expand the experience or the space, the sound, and I decided soundscape would be the best way to do it.

Tell me about the decision to shoot the film in

chronological order.
I thought it made the most sense. I did play around with possibly jumbling the timeline – there's always reasons to, but I didn't find a reason to for this one. It was like a step-by-step descent into madness.

Is there a single aspect of the film that you think will resonate with audiences most?
It's the fear of losing your parent. A lot of people share that they have gone through losing a parent and that they struggled with grief. I guess those are things that are repressed by a lot of people; they kind of dread the day when that happens. I think that's what resonates most.

I understand that you were pinched for time to make the deadline for its festival premiere at Fantasia. What were some things that you were happy to have the opportunity to re-shoot for wide release?
I didn't want to reshoot [anything]. [Making the film] was really draining, personally, because of the subject matter and because of how personal it was to me, and I just didn't want to go through it again. But I knew that we were going to make it better, so I kind of just bit the bullet. And what I was most excited about was the Atmos mix, the Dolby Atmos mix. I wrote the screenplay with Atmos in mind and the surround sound that we mixed with wasn't as pinpoint accurate. So, I got to do things that were in the script that weren't in that first cut that went to Fantasia.

"RESTRAINT CAN BIRTH CREATIVITY A LOT OF THE TIME, SO IT WAS A BLESSING, REALLY, FOR UNDERTONE. WHO KNOWS WHAT I WOULD HAVE MADE IF I HAD TOO MUCH MONEY?"

– WRITER/DIRECTOR IAN TUASON

What do you think made* Undertone *so attractive to A24 in particular?
I had my sights set on A24, pretty much. I mean, it's elevated horror, and they do it best with [films like] *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*. Neon, too, was a studio that I wanted, but I wanted to work with A24 on top of the list. That was my intention, actually, to make an A24 movie, so I was really happy when they agreed.

Home Is Where The Horror Is: *Shooting on a tight budget in the house he grew up in, filmmaker Ian Tuason (centre image, far right) brings his childhood fears to the screen with* ***Undertone****.*

LOW ON BUDGET BUT HIGH ON FRIGHTS, *DREAM EATER* IS THE CANADIAN INDIE HORROR HIT THAT PROVES FOUND FOOTAGE STILL HAS TEETH

NIGHTMARES CAUGHT ON CAMERA

BY LENA REID

THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF INDIE HORROR FILMMAKERS WORKING HARD TO SEE THEIR NIGHTMARES REALIZED ON SCREEN, BUT THE sad reality is that making the film is only half the battle – getting eyeballs on it is another matter entirely. For the up-and-coming Canadian filmmaking trio of Jay Drakulic, Mallory Drumm, and Alex Lee Williams, a single big win at a film festival and a viral social media review was enough to catapult their microbudget *Dream Eater* into a distribution deal, with a Blu-ray and Collector's Edition DVD due out March 31. Drawn from the filmmakers' personal experience, and realized via a crew of eight tireless creatives and nine days shooting at a remote cabin, *Dream Eater* is a sleeper breakout that drummed up its buzz the new-fashioned way.

The found-footage film follows Mallory and Alex (played by co-writers/directors Drumm and Williams, respectively) as they hole up in a snowy winter rental for a short getaway. Unfortunately, their objective isn't all that romantic – Alex has been plagued with nightmares and sleepwalking, and his doctor has tasked Mallory with documenting as much of it as she can. But when her gathered footage points to something more ancient and supernatural than mere parasomnia, Mallory finds herself fighting for their lives and sanity rather than a good night's sleep.

As is standard for an effective found-footage flick, the devil's in the details that make the events of the film feel so real – it needs to make sense that this footage even exists, first of all, and the players have the heavy lifting of making us believe in things unseen, implied, and partially concealed. If audiences bristled at the way a cranky Alex was inclined to snap at his doting girlfriend, it's because their strained relationship felt authentic in a way that more polished fare struggles to pull off. That icy tension only serves to amplify the chills onscreen, bolstered by the claustrophobia of the inclement Canadian winter, where a blanket of untouched snow smothers the terrors occurring in the Laurentian Mountains of Quebec.

It's a simple concept but *Dream Eater*'s drive and effective use of meagre means were recognized by Portland's H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival, where it won Best Feature – and that's where the snowball got rolling, as they say. Following the fest, a popular social media personality made a video review, singing the film's praises. That review went viral, catching the attention of tens of thousands of horror fans – including one Eli Roth, who immediately reached out to the filmmakers and picked up *Dream Eater* for wide distribution under his label, The Horror Section. That acquisition gave the movie a few more gigs on the festival circuit (including Beyond Fest), a limited theatrical release last October, and a streaming spot on Netflix the following month.

Expect more to come from this Toronto-based trio!

Cont'd on p.18

SLASHERS & SPIRITS

BY **BENOIT BLACK**

WITHIN THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF CANADIAN INDEPENDENT HORROR, LISA OVIES STANDS AS PART OF A new wave of writer-directors working with wit, resourcefulness, and a clear allegiance to genre fundamentals. A Mexican-Canadian filmmaker based in Vancouver, Ovies writes and directs her films herself, operating closer to the grindstone tradition of D.I.Y. horror.

Her breakout feature, *Puppet Killer* (2019), was produced on a modest budget and shot with an emphasis on practical effects, genre fluency, and more than a few winks to slasher mechanics. Unfortunately, the film would be the subject of a legal setback early on, which meant few horror fans knew it even existed. Still, critics and festival audiences praised *Puppet Killer*'s throwback sensibility, practical gore, and unapologetic embrace of exploitation traditions at a time when much indie horror was drifting toward abstraction.

Ovies' much-awaited sophomore film, *The Curse of Ghost Island*, is set for a 2026 release and follows a group of influencers invited to a remote island by a mysterious host to hunt for a buried treasure rumoured to be protected by spirits. Although details are scant, the set-up promises a clash of old-world menace with Ovies' slashstick sensibilities.

"This film has so much Canadian heart in it," she tells *Rue Morgue*, "and I am bursting with pride in what we have accomplished and what we are about to share with the world."

***Nurture To Nightmare: Undertone**'s protagonist Evy (Nina Kiri, right) was based on Tuason's own experiences caregiving at home while working on podcasts.*

That's a bit of a controversial term: "elevated horror." How would you define "an A24 film"?

With *Undertone*, I just want to scare [people]. I want to terrify. You've really got to up your game, right? I guess that's why they call it "elevated." I drew from every genre when drawing up my storyboards; every shot had an intention, every decision. When we open with the kettle whistling – to me, that's just like a ticking time bomb. [*Undertone*] looks pretty and it sounds good, so I don't know. I think that's what elevated horror is.

Are you a fan of Canadian horror? Can you name a few indie Canadian films that have inspired you?

Oh, well. I mean, *Pontypool*. I stole from *Pontypool*. It's terrifying when they start speaking and you don't understand what they're saying. The scene [in *Undertone*] where the caller keeps asking for Mary – I kind of drew from *Pontypool* there. And a bunch of shots too, because, you know, it's in a radio station and it's mostly one location.

Is it easier or harder for indie filmmakers to have their dreams realized in Canada?

It's harder, especially if you count on the [funding] system that they have in place here – because I did, and I didn't get anything made. I don't think I had anything read, to be honest. There were a couple of people that said no to *Undertone*; I don't even know if they read it. I just bet on myself, but I had the opportunity to, because I had the house to myself where my parents passed and I also had an inheritance, so I just put it all in there.

How would you describe what makes Canadian horror unique versus a Hollywood movie?

You're working with a smaller budget, so I think you've got to get more creative. Restraint can birth creativity a lot of the time, so it was a blessing, really, for *Undertone*. Who knows what I would have made if I had too much money?

Do you feel like there's still pressure for young Canadian filmmakers to relocate to L.A. in order to have a career in filmmaking?

After this sale to A24, I don't think there is pressure [for me] to relocate; there's just pressure to make what you want to make, the way you want to make it, and figure out how you can make it. There are a lot of other films I want to make, but [*Undertone*] was the most doable. I specifically thought, "What can I write that's in one location?" and then I had this podcast idea and then it just all made sense.

Are you comfortable staying in the horror genre or do you have aspirations to move outside of it eventually?

I was going to move outside of it – I'm trying to do a sci-fi horror. I'm always looking to link the genres, so I won't suddenly, you know, do

RISING CANADIAN FILMMAKER EMMA HIGGINS DELIVERS A TENSE PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR TALE ABOUT TEENAGE DEVOTION GONE DANGEROUSLY WRONG IN HER STRIKING FEATURE DEBUT

FANDOM GONE FERAL

BY MAGILL FOOTE AND NOVA NOX

EMMA HIGGINS HAS QUICKLY EMERGED AS ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING RISING VOICES IN INDEPENDENT CANADIAN HORROR with her bold visual sensibility, honed through years of acclaimed short form work. A self-taught filmmaker from Vancouver, Higgins began her career working across various departments on film and television productions before teaching herself to direct through low-budget projects and music videos, many of which leaned into dark imagery, heightened emotion, and genre-inflected storytelling.

Influenced by psychological thrillers and character-driven horror rather than traditional jump-scare fare, she gravitated toward stories that explored the darker corners of human behaviour. Over the years, she built a strong reputation in the music industry, crafting visually striking videos for artists such as Jessie Reyez, and Tegan and Sara, often infusing them with cinematic tension and moody atmospheres. Having lived and worked in Toronto and Los Angeles, Higgins gradually transitioned from short-form content into narrative filmmaking, bringing her genre instincts and emotional focus into longer storytelling formats.

She now makes her striking feature debut with *Sweetness* – in theatres in March from Elevation Pictures – a psychological thriller that tells the story of sixteen-year-old Rylee (Kate Hallett) as she descends into the depths of her obsession with teen idol Payton Adler (Herman Tømmeraas).

The film kicks off when Rylee and her friend Marnie (Amanda Brugel) attend one of Payton's concerts and, after the two are separated and a near-miss almost claims her life, Rylee finds herself being driven home by Payton himself. Little does she know, however, that her idol is on his way for his post-show drug fix, and before long he's passed out on the floor of her bathroom. It's at this point that Rylee's obsession kicks into high gear, as she takes it upon herself to break Payton of his addiction – by handcuffing him in the basement.

While comparisons to *Misery* are definitely warranted in Higgins' tale of parasocial fandom spiralling out of control (even the title is a clever antonym), Rylee is a very different character from Annie Wilkes. She begins as a timid, starstruck girl, but slowly develops a righteousness to her motives that convinces her she's doing the morally just thing by trying to cure Payton – maybe even fulfilling her destiny. Naturally, things get out of hand quickly, and after Rylee accidentally murders Marnie, it becomes clear there's no going back for anyone involved.

Higgins' two-hander relies heavily on the performances of its leads, and newcomers Hallett and Tømmeraas are both very good.

Savvy audiences might feel like they know where *Sweetness* is headed early on, but the twists and turns in the final half hour pack a wallop. For those looking for a Gen Alpha take on a Stephen King classic, *Sweetness* won't leave a bitter taste in your mouth

BEYOND SKINAMARINK

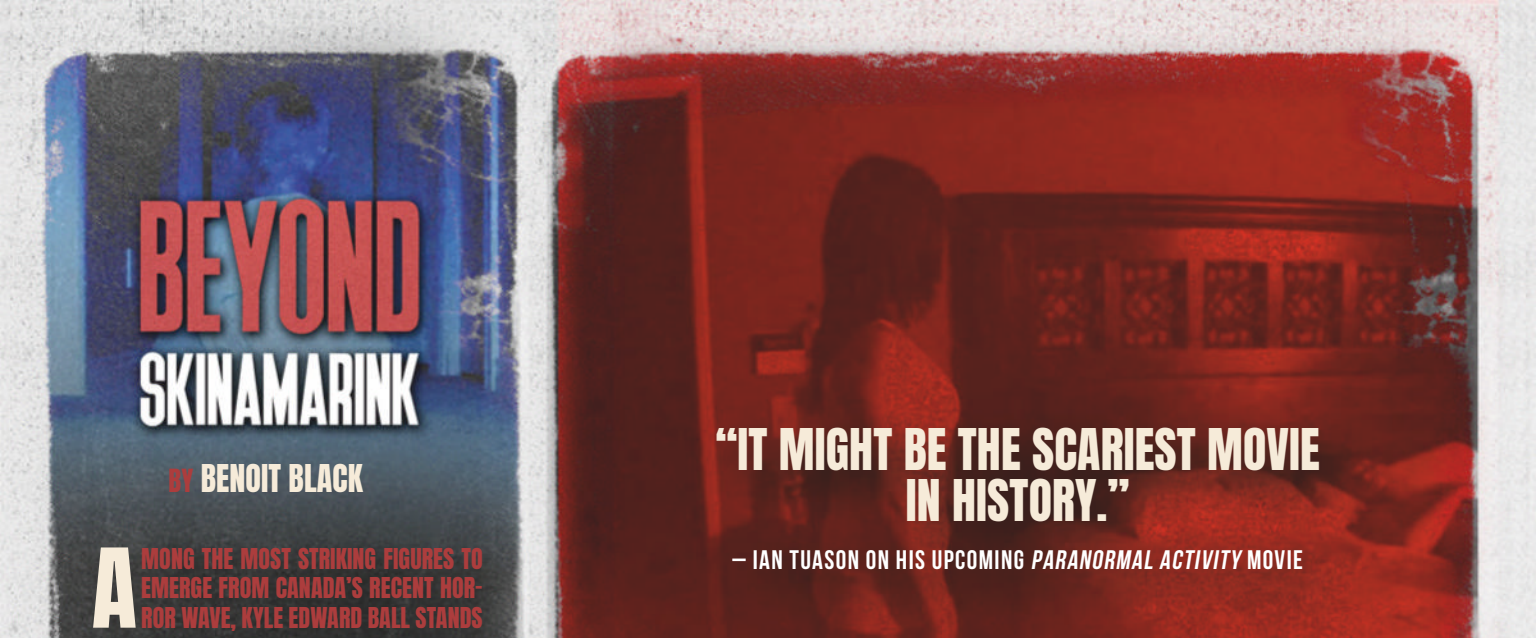
BY BENOIT BLACK

AMONG THE MOST STRIKING FIGURES TO EMERGE FROM CANADA'S RECENT HORROR WAVE, KYLE EDWARD BALL STANDS out for proving that atmosphere alone can still rattle the collective nervous system. His sudden prominence was not the result of industry grooming or festival pedigree, but of visionary D.I.Y. cinema that paid off in cultural shockwaves.

Ball came to attention through online short-form experiments, many rooted in childhood fears, but it was his debut feature *Skinamarink* (2022) that catapulted him to prominence. Shot for a mere $15,000 in Edmonton, Alberta, the film rejected conventional narrative in favour of near-total sensory deprivation: fixed camera angles, creeping darkness, indistinct voices, and the suffocating logic of dreams. For some viewers it was intolerable; for others it was unbearable... in the good way.

What made *Skinamarink* break through was its devotion to stillness, negative space, and a profound understanding of viewers' own fear reflexes. Ball stripped horror back to a preverbal place, capturing what it feels like to be small, alone, and unsure whether something unseen is watching. In an era of polished performances and overexplained mythologies, *Skinamarink* felt hostile to modern viewing habits. That hostility generated a rare kind of grassroots momentum that pushed the film from experimental curiosity to international release.

That sensibility promises to carry forward into Ball's sophomore feature, *The Land of Nod*, which relocates terror to a small, isolated town in the northern Canadian territories, cut off by a relentless snowstorm. The film credits Elijah Wood's SpectreVision as a producer and, if the title is any indication, appears to further explore the liminal space between wakefulness and sleep – a place uniquely dialled to our deepest fears.



"IT MIGHT BE THE SCARIEST MOVIE IN HISTORY."

– IAN TUASON ON HIS UPCOMING *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY* MOVIE

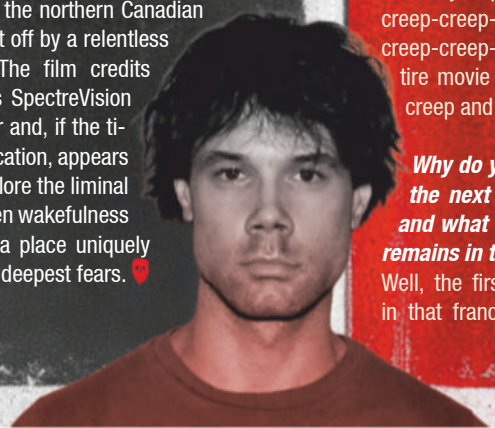
romantic comedy. I don't mind staying in the horror genre, but I do want to make movies in other genres. I think any filmmaker does, anyone who loves movies.

Is there any connection between your literary endeavours and this movie or are they completely different worlds to you?
Oh, they're completely different. The stuff I wrote there, they're done in my mind. They're just what I intended to do, and I finished [them], and then I'm just putting them on the shelf and leaving them there. But with *Undertone*, it was never intended to be one movie – it's a trilogy. There's intention of doing a sequel.

What's the key to keeping an audience on edge using just audio?
Edging the audience?

Exactly.
I feel like we didn't [use just audio]; it was a combination of audio and the narrative. I had a formula when I was writing, I just studied movies that scared me, like *Paranormal Activity* and *The Exorcist* and *The Blair Witch Project*. You always start off with a couple of beats that are just creepy and then a scare. Either a jump scare or just something that is clearly scary, something ominous, like, did you hear that voice in the background? Or is there a hidden message in this audio? I kind of just played it like music; it was just creep-creep-creep and then scare, and creep-creep-creep, scare. And then the entire movie was really just one big creep-creep and scare.

Why do you think you're a good fit for the next* Paranormal Activity *and what untapped potential remains in that franchise?
Well, the first three movies in that franchise are very strong. They kind of strayed away from the original idea, which was very similar to *Undertone*; keep it in one location, make it about two people, and follow that formula of "don't show anything, just get people leaning in and then scare them with audio or something offscreen or something implied." And that generates, you know, images in people's minds that I didn't create. They created them themselves and whatever they create is always scarier than whatever I could show them. The first three [*Paranormal Activity*] movies did that and then the next four movies, I believe, started showing more and looking more like real movies, as opposed to found-footage movies. And I think when you watch *Undertone*, you kind of see [found-footage quality]. I know that type of horror pretty well, so I had ideas for *Paranormal* before I was approached. So yeah, I'm taking it back. I'm bringing it back to what scared people the first time. And I'm going to amp it up. It's going to be scary. I don't know what else to say, but it might be the scariest movie in history.



AN ICY TALE OF SEASIDE FATE AND RETRIBUTION, JUSTIN OAKEY'S *HANGASHORE* IS A BEACON FROM THE PROVINCE OF FOG AND MIST

ATLANTIC HORROR

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

NEWFOUNDLAND-BASED JUSTIN OAKEY IS HARDLY NEW TO THE WORLD OF FILMMAKING – AN AWARD-WINNING EDITOR AND accomplished documentarian, he's worked on numerous shorts, music videos, and features, including the gritty new 1970s-inspired gorefest *Dolly* (see p.30). But it's Oakey's third narrative feature, *Hangashore*, due out later this year, that will cement him as a powerful voice in Canadian genre storytelling – even if telling his stories in his own hometown presents its own unique challenges.

"I feel like Canada is in a strange identity crisis with its film industry; that's just my personal opinion," he says. "Places like Newfoundland – we don't get a lot of the national funding. So I feel like it forces us to be highly creative with the kind of stories we want to tell, because we can't make the same kind of films that Toronto and Vancouver can make, hoping that they'll catch on in the U.S. You need to make things that are a little bit more expressive and a little bit more unique. You kind of have to be creative and ambitious, or else it'll just never get made."

Hangashore tells the tale of Vera (Hera Hilmar), an Icelandic artist who moves to Newfoundland in the search of her missing father at the behest of recurring nightmares that suggest he's lost at sea. When she meets down-on-his-luck seal fisherman Jack (James Frecheville), their chemistry is intense to the point of supernatural. But Jack's got more on his mind than romance – business is bad due to increasing restrictions on his trade, and his first mate/best friend Donovan (Stephen Oates) has an alcohol problem that puts the whole operation at risk. Vera's desperate to follow her dreams and search for her father in the misty waters, but Jack's got no time for visions and premonitions… until his latest expedition is plagued with enough misfortune to make him wonder if ghosts aren't playing a role in his plight after all.

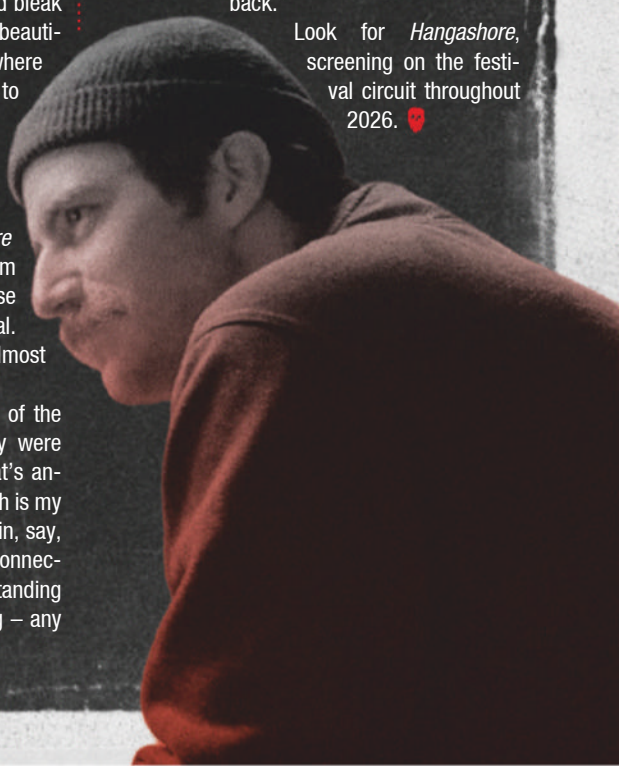
With its shocking bouts of violence and bleak plot, *Hangashore* paints a desolate yet beautiful portrait of Canada's East Coast, where survival of the fittest is continually put to the test. Its title, in fact, is a bit of local fisherman slang: a pejorative term for a lazy good-for-nothing, hanging around shore instead of braving the hostile sea. The supernatural element in *Hangashore* is limited to Vera's surreal, fuzzy dream sequences, but the hardship facing those in Newfoundland's seal trade is very real. Ironically, it was this plot element that almost killed the film before it was even made.

"I got rejected for funding, and some of the comments were just the fact that they were called 'seal hunters,'" he explains. "That's another issue we're having in Canada; which is my film gets assessed by a group of people in, say, Montreal or Toronto, with absolutely no connection to the region, absolutely no understanding of the cultural idiosyncrasies or anything – any nuance whatsoever – and if they're offended or upset about something that's not that offensive or upsetting for this region, you don't get the funding."

Possessed of that Newfoundland work ethic of unflagging tenacity in a hostile environment, Oakey found an effective workaround.

"I ended up submitting the second time and removing all dialogue [that concerned seals]," he says. "And then I got the funding and put it all back."

Look for *Hangashore*, screening on the festival circuit throughout 2026.



PART POST-PUNK, PART DARKWAVE, TRAITRS REPRESENTS A MODERN STRAIN OF MUSIC ROOTED IN HORROR CINEMA, RELIGIOUS UNEASE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DREAD

RITES OF POSSESSION

BY SEAN PLUMMER

Blood Brothers: *United by a worldview and a genre they love, Shawn Tucker (left) and Sean-Patrick Nolan formed TRAITRS over a decade ago.*

TRAITRS HAS NEVER TREATED HORROR AS A COSTUME. THE BAND HASN'T DIRECTED FRIGHT FLICKS LIKE ROB ZOMBIE, IT doesn't name-drop monster movies in its songs like the Misfits, and it doesn't enact mock executions onstage like Alice Cooper. For vocalist/guitarist Shawn Tucker and keyboardist Sean-Patrick Nolan, horror is not something they use so much as something they inhabit. It is a shared language, a formative obsession, and a structural force that informs how the duo writes, sounds, looks… and ultimately understands the world.

"We don't name-drop monsters or act things out onstage," Tucker says. "That stuff's been done – and done well."

Now in its second decade as a band, TRAITRS has established itself within the global dark music scene, having shared stages with acts such as Twin Tribes, She Past Away, Lebanon Hanover, The Chameleons, and She Wants Revenge. But what sets TRAITRS apart from its contemporaries – and what first drew *Rue Morgue*'s attention – is the distinctiveness with which the genre permeates the music and aesthetic.

You can see it in the Frankenstein's Monster-masked protagonist in the video for the *Rites and Ritual* track "*Heretic*," itself named after *The Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977). It's there again in the *Suspiria*-inspired lighting of the clip for "Thin Flesh," from 2018's *Butcher's Coin* – a song that later appeared in 2024's reboot of *The Crow*, ticking off a long-standing goal for the band: contributing a track to a horror film soundtrack.

"We saw that Boy Harsher scored a [short] horror film [*The Runner*, 2022]," says Nolan, "and Trent Reznor, and Thom Yorke did the *Suspiria* [2018] thing. It's always been a goal of ours."

"I'd always said if they ever did *The Crow* again, I would kill to be on it because I felt that original soundtrack meant so much," adds Tucker. "It was a brilliant soundtrack and, you know, it was a bit of a game changer."

TRAITRS formed in Toronto in 2015 under circumstances that feel almost incidental in hindsight. Nolan, a self-described lifelong student of music, was studying English at university when he was assigned to write about Tucker's band at the time. Tucker, several years older, had grown up primarily in Vancouver before spending years in Britain, eventually relocating to Toronto. The meeting was professional

"I LIKE USING HORROR AS A WAY TO TALK ABOUT OTHER THINGS, LIKE MENTAL HEALTH OR RELIGION."

– SEAN-PATRICK NOLAN, TRAITRS

on paper, but the connection was immediate. The two bonded over punk music, post-punk, and – crucially – horror movies.

"I remember my parents always renting the Universal monster films from the library," Nolan recalls, "*The Invisible Man*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, all of that. I used to love taking out books from the library, and then I also remember my parents bought me these coffee-table books of movie posters – Dracula and vampires, Christopher Lee and Bela Lugosi and all these people covered in blood. Before even really understanding what horror was, I was really just intrigued by the imagery. It was barbaric and dark and weird and mysterious."

That fascination eventually extended beyond film. Nolan gravitated toward gothic literature and writers who folded horror into broader literary traditions, citing Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic and Angela Carter's surreal, feminist reworkings of fairy tales as early touchstones.

When they began making music together, TRAITRS initially followed Tucker's vision of fusing dark '80s pop with the post-punk revival of the early 2000s. Over time, however, an unspoken ethos emerged – one that drew on horror's metaphoric power as much as its imagery and atmosphere.

"I like the idea of using horror as a way to talk about other things like mental health or religion, using it metaphorically or as a fable," says Nolan. "It's always neat to do that, to be able to make societal commentaries using horror. I think it's really effective to use because it's melodramatic, so you can play with that."

That sensibility carries through TRAITRS' music and has been present since the band's earliest recordings; its debut album, *Rites and Ritual* (2016), announced its thematic territory immediately and established an early visual language rooted in classic horror making explicit the band's dialogue with genre cinema.

The follow-up EP, *Speak in Tongues* (2017), pushed that dialogue further. Influenced by films about madness and psychological collapse – *Psycho II*, *In the Mouth of Madness*, and *Session 9* among them – the release leaned into horror as a narrative device. Its B-side, "Hand of Holy Fingers," was adapted from Tucker's own short story about a woman isolated in the woods who murders her children in the name of God, underscoring how deeply themes of faith, extremism, and violence had already taken hold.

The band's next release was 2018's *Butcher's Coin*, which Tucker later referred to as their "mainstream breakthrough horror blockbuster." Conceptualized as an "anthology of horror," the album treats each song as a self-containedshort story. Tracks such as "Omen" and "The Suffering of Spiders" unfold like miniature narratives, while "Thin Flesh" – with its *Suspiria*-inspired lighting – became the band's most widely heard song, racking up more than 15 million streams. Despite that success, the duo deliberately shifted course on 2021's *Horses in the Abattoir*.

"The horrors and sadness of real life were my main objective on this record," remembers Tucker. The album focused less on cinematic horror and more on grief, loss, and the passage of time. The mood remained bleak, but the references were internalized and rooted in lived experience rather than genre homage.

That detour makes *Possessor* feel less like an escalation than a return. The new album reunites TRAITRS with longtime producer Josh

Horror Show: *TRAITRS* ***Possessor*** *tour 2026 goes into June with shows across Europe and North America.*

TRAITRS STANDS AT THE FOREFRONT OF A LONG-RUNNING GLOBAL DARKWAVE RESURGENCE, A LINEAGE THAT HAS SPENT THE PAST 25 YEARS TRANSLATING EXISTENTIAL DREAD INTO STARK, MODERN SOUNDS

RITUAL NOISE

THE QUIET HORROR OF MODERN DARKWAVE

BY BENOIT BLACK

SHE PAST AWAY

Formed in Bursa, Turkey, in 2006 by Volkan Caner and İdris Akbulut (later replaced by Doruk Öztürkcan), She Past Away has become a leading darkwave act. Singing exclusively in Turkish, the band gained international attention with *Belirdi Gece* (2012), followed by *Narin Yalnızlık* (2015) and *Disko Anksiyete* (2019). Its reverberating gothic vocals, stark aesthetic, and funeral pacing has made it a staple of gothic festivals worldwide, with its music frequently appearing in horror movies and media.

Essential Transmissions: "Asimilasyon," "Ritüel," "Sanri," "Gerçekten Özleyince"

LEBANON HANOVER

Lebanon Hanover was formed in 2010 between Switzerland and the UK before relocating to Berlin. Made up of just two people – Larissa Iceglass and William Maybelline – they created a minimalist sound known for icy detachment and existential themes. The duo became central to the 2010s darkwave revival, with music used in underground horror screenings and art-house genre programming.

Essential Transmissions: "Gallowdance," "Sadness is Rebellion," "Alien"

BOY HARSHER

Boy Harsher formed in 2013 in Northampton, Massachusetts, led by vocalist Jae Matthews and producer Augustus Muller. Deeply embedded in horror culture, the band wrote and starred in the short horror film *The Runner* (2022), which spawned a full-length album of the same name a year later, cementing its crossover appeal between darkwave, synth horror scores, and independent genre cinema.

Essential Transmissions: "Pain," "Yr Body is Nothing," "Fate"

DRAB MAJESTY

Drab Majesty began in Los Angeles in 2011 as the project of Andrew Clinco, later expanding into a duo with Alex Nicolaou. Albums such as *The Demonstration* (2017) and *Modern Mirror* (2019) refined its cold-wave sound and androgynous visual mythology. Known for immersive live presentations and conceptual identity, the band's music has circulated widely through horror-adjacent films and trailers.

Essential Transmissions: "39 By Design," "Cold Souls," "Ellipsis," "Oxytocin"

MINUIT MACHINE

Blood, bodies, and domination are key themes in the music of Minuit Machine, a band that invokes violence, control, and erotic power dynamics through a cold confrontational sound. Formed by Hélène de Thoury and Amandine Stioui, the act emerged from Paris' coldwave and minimal synth underground in 2013. Early releases such as *Blue Moon* (2013) and *Violent Rains* (2015) blended icy electronics with confessional vocals. Now centred on Stioui, the project continues to evolve through releases like *24* (2022) and remains a key presence in contemporary European dark music.

Essential Transmissions: "Danger," "Battles," "Ghost"

TWIN TRIBES

Luis Navarro and Joel Niño, Jr. formed Twin Tribes in Brownsville, Texas, in 2017. Drawing on post-punk, coldwave, and gothic romanticism, the duo built early momentum with *Shadows* (2018) and *Ceremony* (2019). By weaving a distinct Latin American sensibility into the darkwave lineage, Twin Tribes quickly set itself apart – a synthesis that fuelled its rapid ascent and relentless international touring.

Essential Transmissions: "Shadows," "The River," "Heart & Feather"

LINEA ASPERA

Established in Berlin in 2011 by Australian vocalist Zoè Zanias and Ryan Ambridge on synthesizers, Linea Aspera quickly became known for a stark, analog-driven sound rooted in classic minimal wave. Its self-titled debut (2012) remains a touchstone release, followed after a hiatus by *Preservation Bias* (2019), *LP II* (2020), and a single in 2024. The band's music frequently touches on institutional dread – control systems and Cold War-era paranoia translated into sound.

Essential Transmissions: "Fer-De-Lance," "Eviction," "Mycelium"

"ONE DAY WE WOULD LOVE TO SCORE A HORROR FILM."

– SHAWN TUCKER, TRAITRS

Karmody (Tanya Tagaq, Fucked Up) and draws once again on horror cinema, religious extremism, and moral panic – this time sharpened by years of touring and personal upheaval. Its first single, "Burn in Heaven," was inspired by the real-world case of Anneliese Michel, the mentally ill German woman who died in 1976 after enduring 67 Catholic exorcisms.

"It frustrates me," Tucker says of the cultural conditions surrounding the case, "because something so simple, or something I might see as simple, seems so difficult for others to comprehend."

"It's almost like a second Satanic Panic going on right now, especially in the United States," adds Nolan. "It seems like people are really weaponizing Christianity, especially lately. As someone who grew up in a Catholic household and has kind of left that, it feels like the stink is still on me a little bit, and I'm really sensitive to these things and very aware of them."

That sensitivity runs through *Possessor*, nowhere more forcefully than on "Prayertaker," the album's most confrontational track. Addressing Canada's residential school system directly, the song dispenses with metaphor entirely.

"I wanted to bring [the residential school issue] back into the light," Tucker explains. "The media says, 'Well, we've all moved on from that. That was two years ago, three years ago.' I feel it's still unresolved. I'm never going to try to be the voice of the victim or something horrific like that, but I wanted to rip the Band-Aid off again."

Clearly, for TRAITRS horror is less about escapism and more an opportunity for confrontation, an approach that extends to the band's sound as much as its subject matter. Far from simply echoing '80s templates, the duo approaches sound the way horror filmmakers approach atmosphere.

"A huge component of our horror aesthetic is the score and the soundtrack and the sound effects and the atmosphere," Nolan says. "Bringing in some of those cinematic elements was really important to us."

Those elements manifest as metallic percussion, textural noise, and subtle sonic intrusions that operate almost subconsciously. Songs are layered with metallic percussion, low-frequency textures, and subtle sonic intrusions that spill their dark tonic directly into the subconscious.

"There's more going on than just trying to repeat some of the '80s stuff," Nolan notes. "We're enriching these old ideas, adding textural things, like percussion/metallic sounds, little grains, and things that are just kind of layered in in subtle ways."

"One day we would love to score a horror film," adds Tucker.

Appropriately, TRAITRS' engagement with horror extends beyond the studio and into their lives on the road. Years of international touring have turned Tucker and Nolan into pilgrims of genre history, visiting filming locations and haunted sites whenever schedules allow. They have stood inside Argento's Rome locations, stayed in the haunted Geiser Grand Hotel, and performed at Colorado's Stanley Hotel, the real-world inspiration for *The Shining*.

"When we're on tour," Tucker says, "we're always looking for the weird."

Adds Nolan: "If Shawn says, 'Hey, we're gonna go to the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* house,' I'm like, 'When are we going?'"

TRAITRS is currently on tour.

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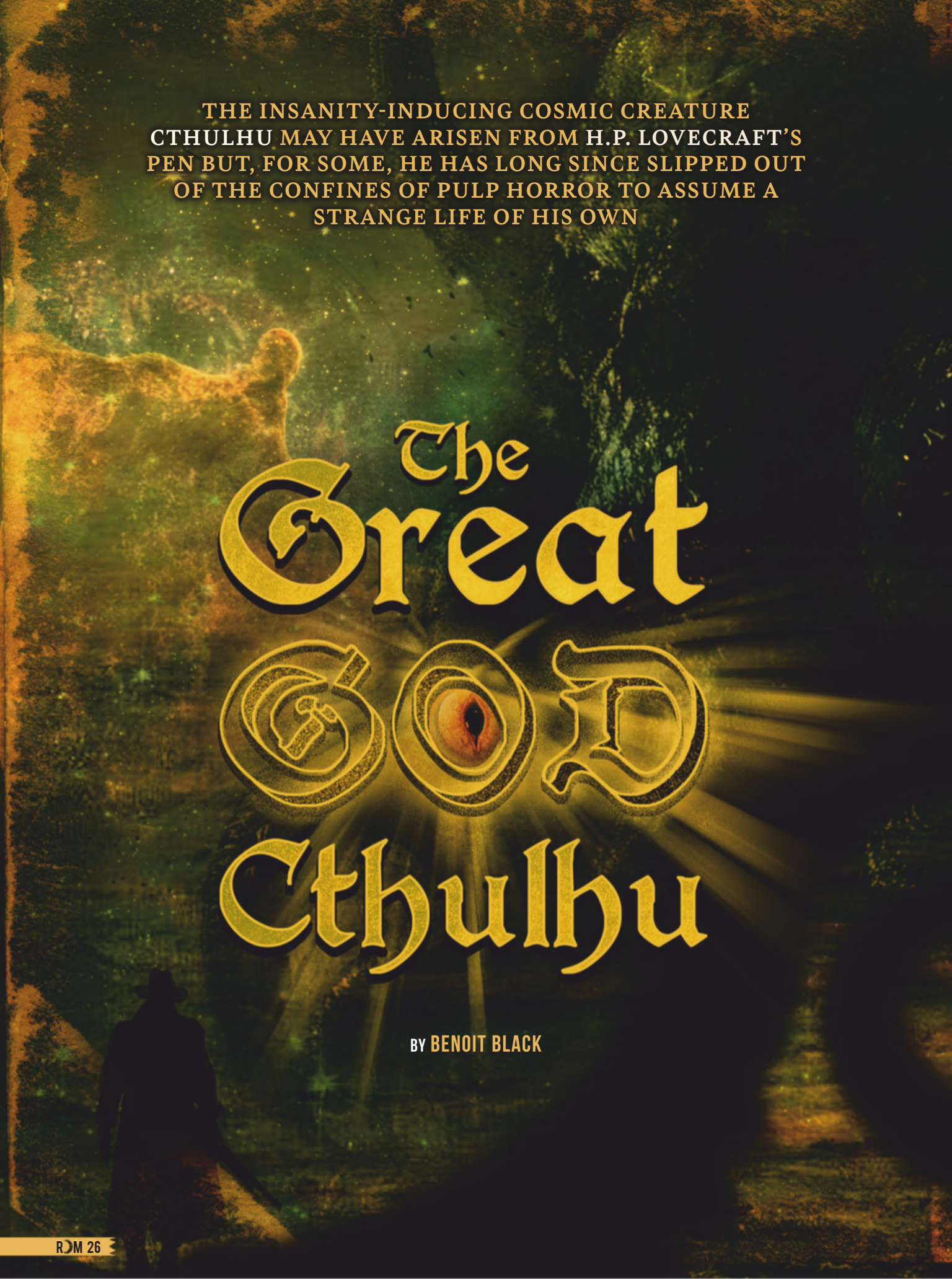
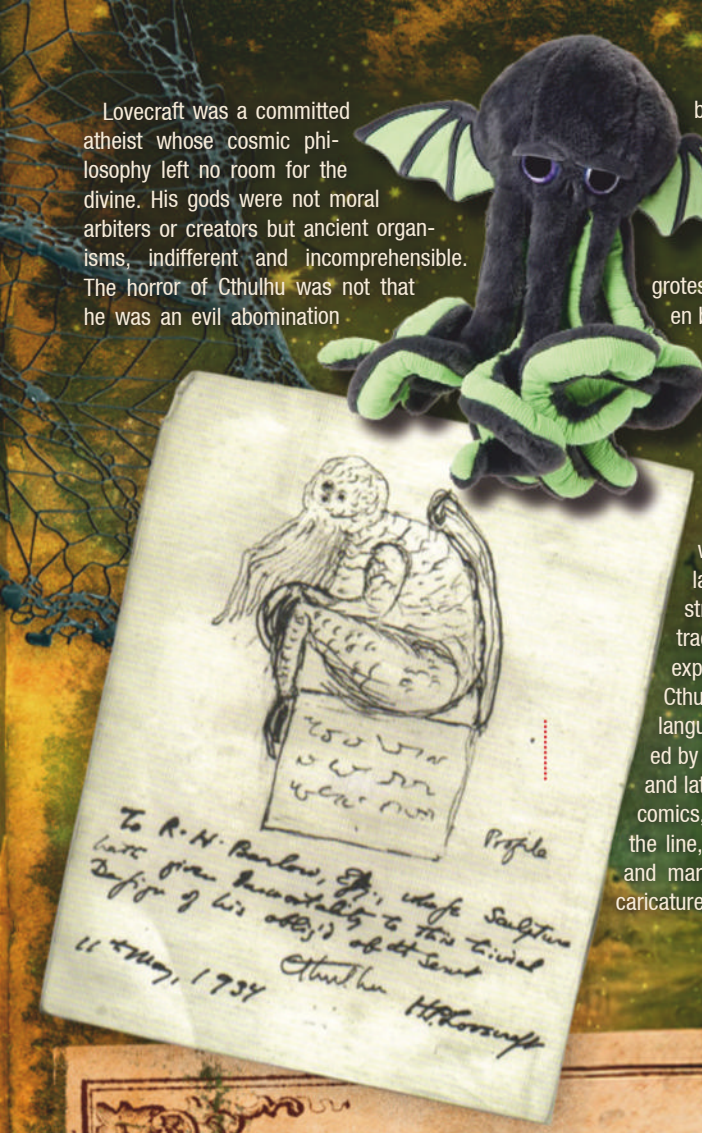


THE INSANITY-INDUCING COSMIC CREATURE CTHULHU MAY HAVE ARISEN FROM H.P. LOVECRAFT'S PEN BUT, FOR SOME, HE HAS LONG SINCE SLIPPED OUT OF THE CONFINES OF PULP HORROR TO ASSUME A STRANGE LIFE OF HIS OWN

The Great GOD Cthulhu

BY BENOIT BLACK

WHEN H.P. LOVECRAFT INTRODUCED THE TITULAR ENTITY IN 1928'S "THE CALL OF CTHULHU," HE described a nightmare of flesh and scale meant to dwarf humanity's religious instincts and expose them as evolutionary debris. For the people in Lovecraft's stories, faith was less likely to protect them than drive them mad and devour them. And yet, nearly a century later, Cthulhu has escaped the margins of fiction and entered a strange liminal space. For a small but persistent number of people, the Great Old One is more than a literary creation or a pop culture icon. He is something to be revered, invoked, maybe even worshipped. This is not the rise of a new world religion, nor even a coherent spiritual movement; it is something far stranger, more fragmented, and possibly more revealing.



Lovecraft was a committed atheist whose cosmic philosophy left no room for the divine. His gods were not moral arbiters or creators but ancient organisms, indifferent and incomprehensible. The horror of Cthulhu was not that he was an evil abomination but that he existed at all, vast and alien, and the sheer scale of him rendered any human concerns meaningless. The cults in Lovecraft's stories were grotesque parodies of religion, driven by fear and dreams rather than faith. They worshipped out of compulsion rather than love, a fact that makes the real-world afterlife of Cthulhu somewhat ironic.

The first step in Cthulhu's migration from fiction to faith was fandom. Lovecraft's work, largely ignored by the mainstream during his lifetime, gained traction in pulp circles and later exploded into popular culture. The Cthulhu Mythos became a shared language for cosmic horror, expanded by writers such as August Derleth and later absorbed into games, films, comics, and music. Somewhere along the line, Cthulhu even became cuddly and marketable. And yet beneath the caricatures and plush toys, something different was taking shape.

One of the most visible manifestations to arise from this change took the form of the First United Church of Cthulhu (see sidebar), founded in 1996. Despite the name, it is not a church in any theological sense, though it positions Cthulhu as a mascot for skepticism and secularism. Its message is simple: if people can believe in invisible gods with moral absolutes, why not an ancient cosmic horror who promises nothing at all? By treating an explicitly fictional entity as a god, the Church of Cthulhu highlights what it sees as the arbitrary nature of belief itself. But not all engagements with Cthulhu are so ironic.

Within occult and magical communities, particularly those influenced by chaos magick, Lovecraftian entities have been repurposed as symbols or thought forms. In chaos magick, belief is a tool, something to be adopted temporarily and discarded when useful. In this framework, Cthulhu functions as an "egregore," a psychic construct fuelled by collective imagination.

Chaos magicians may invoke Cthulhu, not because they believe he exists as a literal being, but because of the weight of associations he carries as a symbol – vastness, otherness, and the collapse of human scale. Meditating on Cthulhu becomes a way of confronting insignificance or

STEP INSIDE THE TWIN TEMPLES OF LOVECRAFT'S MOST INFAMOUS FICTIONAL FAITH AND ITS REAL-WORLD OFFSHOOT

Cthulhu: Cult vs. Church

BY BENOIT BLACK

The Cult of Cthulhu

First described in H.P. Lovecraft's 1928 short story "The Call of Cthulhu," the Cult of Cthulhu is not a religion in any conventional sense. It has no scripture or central authority and what binds its adherents is knowledge: forbidden, fragmentary, and often delivered through dreams.

In Lovecraft's mythology, Cthulhu is an ancient entity who arrived on Earth long before humanity. He lies dormant in the sunken city of R'lyeh, waiting for the stars to align so he may rise again. Cultists believe this awakening will end human civilization and usher in a new age where the Great Old Ones reclaim dominion over the planet. In this scheme, morality, law, and human values are dismissed as temporary illusions.

Lovecraft imagined the cult operating in isolated cells scattered across the globe, from swamps in Louisiana to remote Pacific islands, in groups that emerged independently yet shared common rituals. Chief among them is the infamous incantation "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn," a phrase repeated in ecstatic ceremonies marked by drumming, dancing, and trance states. Crude idols of Cthulhu, often carved from stone or unknown materials, served as ritual focal points.

Crucially, dreams play a central role in the cult, as even in sleep, the creature exerts psychic influence, transmitting images, commands, and half-understood truths. Artists, poets, and the psychologically vulner-

dismantling the ego, and its ritual language, borrowed from fiction, is stripped of narrative context and reassembled as psychological theatre.

This approach aligns more closely with modern art than ancient religion in that it is self aware and unapologetically artificial. The great god Cthulhu is not evoked for protection or guidance, rather he becomes a kind of monstrous mirror. And yet there are still others who believe something more literal.

Scattered across online forums, self-published manifestos, and obscure corners of the internet are individuals who assert that Cthulhu is real. Not metaphorically, but as the flesh-and-bone creature that Lovecraft described as a "monster of vaguely anthropoid outline… with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind."

> "The horror of Cthulhu was not that he was an abomination of evil but that he existed at all, vast and alien, and that he rendered human concerns meaningless."

These beliefs, such as they are, are rarely consistent: some frame Cthulhu as an extra-terrestrial intelligence whose influence seeps into human dreams, others blend the Mythos with ancient astronaut theory, suggesting Lovecraft tapped into forbidden truths through unconscious revelation. A few interpret Cthulhu as a pre-human god misremembered through fiction. Not surprisingly, these belief systems follow no shared doctrine or institutional structure. Each is a personal cosmology built from fragments of horror fiction, occultism, and conspiracy. They resemble personal myth-making more than religion, but they reveal something essential about how fiction can be metabolized into belief.

Significantly, none of these movements contradict Lovecraft's creation as much as they appear to and, in many ways, they fulfill the late author's vision. Lovecraft imagined cults that worshipped Cthulhu without understanding him, driven by dreams they could not interpret and truths they could not survive. The modern cults, symbolic or otherwise, mirror this structure; they don't offer coherence, they mainly offer atmosphere.

In an era where belief is increasingly optional, Cthulhu occupies a perfect niche. He is a god you can believe in without believing, a religion you can participate in without faith, a cosmic horror that thrives precisely because he was never meant to be worshipped. Lovecraft once wrote that the most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. The strange afterlife of Cthulhu suggests the opposite may also be true; that the most unsettling thing is our ability to take a story meant to annihilate belief and turn it into something that looks suspiciously like it. Cthulhu may have been born in fiction but faith, once initiated, does not care where its gods come from.

able are particularly susceptible, drawn into the cult through shared nightmares rather than conscious recruitment.

Crucially, cultists do not worship Cthulhu out of love or devotion. Their faith is rooted in fear, awe, and inevitability. They believe humanity's extinction is certain and that survival lies not in resistance, but submission. In Lovecraft's bleak cosmology, enlightenment does not bring comfort, it brings madness… and the terrifying realization that the universe never cared.

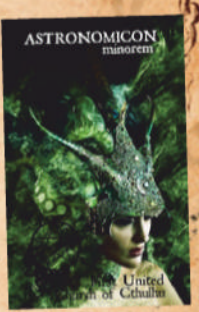
The First United Church of Cthulhu

Founded in 1996, the First United Church of Cthulhu presents itself as a real-world religious organization with Cthulhu as its central figure. Overseen by head priest Khurt Khave, the Arizona-based church describes Lovecraft as a kind of symbolic prophetic figure, framing his cosmic horror not simply as fiction but as revealed truth filtered through his tales. Its materials borrow the structures of organized religion: sacred texts, ordination, ceremonies, and holidays, all refracted through the language of the Cthulhu Mythos. Their so-called "unholy book," the *Astronomicon minorem*, outlines a cosmology rooted in cosmic indifference, existential dread, and humanity's insignificance in an uncaring universe.

Importantly, the church does not operate as a conventional doomsday cult or occult order. Instead, it presents itself as a form of creative religion, blending satire, fandom, and philosophical inquiry. Members are encouraged to engage with Lovecraftian ideas as metaphor, aesthetic, and worldview; the Old Ones are less gods to be worshipped than symbols of the limits of human understanding.

Through online groups, videos, merchandise, and ordination programs, the church also offers a shared identity for horror fans and self-described weirdos drawn to cosmic horror's bleak humour and intellectual provocation. Its rituals and language borrow heavily from religious tradition while maintaining an undercurrent of irony.

Ultimately, the First United Church of Cthulhu is less about faith in a tentacled deity than about exploring how myth, horror, and belief overlap. It stands as a living experiment in how fiction can be ritualized, how fandom can resemble faith, and how modern spirituality can emerge from the strange and the unsettling. Explore it yourself at firstunitedchurchofcthulhu.blogspot.com.



BUILT ON 16MM GRIT, PRACTICAL GORE, AND THE OUTSIDER ETHOS OF 1970s HORROR, *DOLLY* MARKS ROD BLACKHURST'S SAVAGE RETURN TO THE BLOODSOAKED TRADITIONS OF GRINDHOUSE CINEMA

Bleed Like It's 1974

BY **NOVA NOX**
INTERVIEW BY **STACIE PONDER**

IN AN ERA WHERE HORROR OFTEN TRADES BLOOD FOR METAPHOR, *DOLLY* ARRIVES LIKE A CHAINSAW THROUGH A SILK CURTAIN – raw, vicious, and utterly unhinged. Yes, the film carries emotional undercurrents about grief, motherhood, and identity, but its heart beats to the rhythm of 1970s splatter cinema: grainy woods, relentless brutality, and a towering masked killer who feels ripped from the grindhouse era.

"It's funny," says co-writer/director Rod Blackhurst. "You don't often hear the words 'comforting' and 'violent' in the same phrase."

For Blackhurst, that contradiction reflects the vast range of the genre itself, something he embraces as both a filmmaker and lifelong fan.

"I want the fanciest of meals or sometimes I want some fast food," he explains. "I think there's room for all of it."

That appetite for variety – and a filmmaker's instinct that audiences are craving something nastier – helped inspire *Dolly*, a bloodsoaked fairy tale set deep in the woods, out in March from Shudder. The film follows Macy (Fabianne Therese) and her boyfriend Chase (*American Pie*'s Seann William Scott) on a brief getaway that quickly turns into a nightmare when they stumble upon the dumping grounds of a hulking killer who sports an eerie, cracked doll's mask. Trapped inside "Dolly's" home, Macy becomes a plaything in a sadistic game of torture and survival.

Horror has increasingly leaned toward psychological and so-called "elevated" storytelling in recent years – a trend that makes the savage, old-school brutality of *Dolly* feel like a deliberate throwback. Blackhurst agrees that audiences seem hungry for something more visceral.

"I think the reception to *Dolly* has been really great," he says, "because it feels like horror of yesterday."

That retro feel that will woo hard horror fans to *Dolly*'s macabre delights proved to be a stumbling block early on, when Blackhurst – who previously directed slower, psychological thrillers (Netflix's *Amanda Knox* documentary) – found himself doubted by industry gatekeepers.

"I had studio-level meetings where they said, 'We don't know if Rod can make a horror movie,'" he recalls. "And I thought, 'You don't think I can make something twisted? I'll show you.'"

His strategy was viciously simple: lean fully into brutality. To that end, he and a small crew

"DOLLY IS A DESCENT INTO MADNESS."

– DIRECTOR ROD BLACKHURST

Manufacturing A Monster: *Director Rod Blackhurst's* ***Dolly*** *is a deliberate attempt to create a new horror icon.*

headed into the woods south of Nashville to create a proof of concept – a stripped-down, analog slice of splatter meant to capture the spirit of the feature.

"We literally went down there with four of us and made something that embodied the style and tone," he says. "It was about showing what the movie could be."

That tone naturally drew comparisons to the raw outsider horror of the 1970s – Wes Craven's early work and particularly Tobe Hooper's splatter masterpiece *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

"We all love the original," Blackhurst admits. "There are definitely nods – even a character named Tobe."

But for him, the influence wasn't just aesthetic.

"What I loved about those movies is they were trying to do something different from what else was being made at the time," he explains. "They were outsiders making outsider art."

A similar rebellious spirit shaped nearly every creative decision, including the choice to shoot on 16mm film.

"Originally it was practical," he says. "We didn't have money or time to light everything properly. Film stock treats natural light beautifully. It was cheaper than 35mm – though we still couldn't really afford it – but Kodak worked with us."

The grainy textures and harsh sunlight inadvertently pushed *Dolly* even closer to its 1970s ancestors.

"You see it on screen and suddenly it feels like *Texas Chain Saw* or the original *Evil Dead*," Blackhurst says. "It wasn't entirely intentional, but it became part of the soul of the movie."

At the centre of that soul is Dolly herself – a silent, towering presence who blends monstrous brutality with flashes of strange humanity. Of course, finding the right performer was crucial.

"We needed a gifted physical performer who could do so much without words," Blackhurst says about the search that led him to nonbinary professional wrestler Max the Impaler.

"I badgered their wrestling promotion on every social media platform I could," he says with a laugh.

When the pair finally met in Louisville, the connection was immediate.

"Max told me their lifelong dream was to play a horror movie villain. Horror movies made them feel seen and understood. They play the heel – the bad guy – in wrestling. It was kismet."

More than just an imposing physique, Max brought emotional depth to the role, something that will allow audiences to see into the cracks in the mask, even if the camera never does.

"Who Dolly is, is because of Max," Blackhurst says.

Much like Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Dolly is ferocious yet oddly sympathetic – capable of horrific violence while revealing glimpses of vulnerability. That humanity ties into Blackhurst's larger ambition: building Dolly into a lasting slasher icon.

"When we started in 2021, we asked, 'How can we create our *Halloween* or Jason or Freddy or Michael – but do it differently?'" he says.

A major part of that difference is Dolly's gender presentation. Feminine slasher villains remain rare, and Blackhurst wanted to shift the balance.

"I have two daughters," he says. "Women are more interesting than men. It just felt like a way we could add something to the canon."

Rather than playing Dolly for shock or novelty, the film presents her as every bit as brutal and enduring as her masculine counterparts. Yet beneath the carnage lies a surprisingly thoughtful exploration of motherhood, grief, and identity – themes seeded quietly throughout the film.

"It was part of the story from moment one," Blackhurst says. "There are breadcrumbs that help you understand why Dolly is who they are."

The filmmaker reveals that the emotional core grew from real-life experiences of people navigating fractured relationships with parents and fears around becoming mothers themselves.

"You have characters facing motherhood from completely different perspectives, colliding at a crisis point," he explains.

Still, *Dolly* never forgets its splatter roots, especially when it comes to delivering the gore groceries. Nearly every gruesome moment was created physically on set courtesy of Ashley Thomas' Yellow Moth FX.

"We did everything practically and fixed small things later," he says. "You can feel the difference between CGI and practical work."

The analog effects align perfectly with the film's old-school spirit – a tactile, messy brutality that feels ripped from the grindhouse era. For Blackhurst, that embrace of the past is also a celebration of craftsmanship.

"How much longer are we going to be able to do things in an analog way?" he says.

In the end, *Dolly* stands as both homage and evolution: a savage splatter film that channels the ferocity of 1970s horror while layering in modern emotional complexity.

"It's a descent into madness," Blackhurst says proudly. "It's Alice through the looking glass, realizing you're living in a nightmare."

Fans starved for raw, unapologetic carnage need only apply.

REMEDIAL APOCALYPSE

THIS IS NOT A TEST

Starring Olivia Holt, Froy Gutierrez and Corteon Moore
Written and directed by Adam MacDonald
Shudder

From early reviews, it's clear that Courtney Summers' 2012 YA zombie novel *This Is Not a Test* struck a deep chord with readers, many of whom connected strongly with its teenage protagonist, Sloane. Abandoned by her older sister Lily in the wake of their father's abuse, Sloane is on the brink of taking her own life when a zombie apocalypse suddenly erupts. Before long, her quiet suburban street is overrun by fast-moving, flesh-hungry monsters, and Sloane finds herself trapped inside her high school with a small group of classmates.

Like most zombie stories, the infected aren't the true focus of Summers' novel. Instead, the narrative zeroes in on Sloane's emotional journey as she searches for a reason to live. Canadian filmmaker Adam MacDonald similarly centres his adaptation on Sloane (played by *Heart Eyes*' Olivia Holt), charting her shift from self-destruction to survival. Unfortunately, while the novel became a bestseller thanks to its compelling characters and emotional weight, those strengths don't fully carry over to the screen.

That's not to fault MacDonald's cast. Holt brings a convincing mix of angst and toughness to a character who moves from running from her problems to confronting them head-on. Strong supporting performances also come from Corteon Moore (*Abraham's Boys*) as the surprisingly layered jock Carey and Carson MacCormac (*Clown in a Cornfield*) as his rival Trace.

However, where Summers' readers praised the depth of her characters and their emotional investment in the story, MacDonald's film doesn't achieve the same impact. Solid performances and a handful of gnarly kills aside, *This Is Not a Test* doesn't quite come together as effectively as the director's previous work. Still, MacDonald excels at capturing the eerie atmosphere of shadowy high school hallways and treats his young characters with the seriousness their dire circumstances demand. Bonus points for a zombie kill set to the sounds of Canadian '90s alt-rock heroes The Age of Electric.

SEAN PLUMMER

HEX AND KISSES

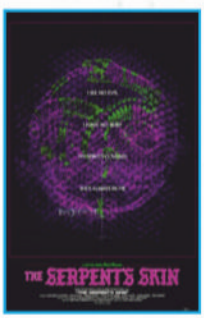
THE SERPENT'S SKIN

Starring Alexandra McVicker, Avalon Fast and Charlotte Chimes
Directed by Alice Maio Mackay
Written by Alice Maio Mackay and Benjamin Pahl Robinson
Dark Star Pictures

Coming of age can mean many things: body changes, young love, confusing emotions. In horror films, it can also mean discovering psychic powers, plenty of sex, and unleashing demons.

When Australian director Alice Maio Mackay is discussed, the focus usually lands on her youth and her remarkable productivity. Making a single feature film is an achievement at any age but completing six in as many years – all before turning 22 – is extraordinary. Across her work, Mackay has shown a growing command of the horror genre, and *The Serpent's Skin* sharpens that fluency.

The film follows Anna (Alexandra McVicker), who moves to the city to live with her sister (Charlotte Chimes) after fleeing her transphobic podunk hometown. There, she meets tattoo artist Gen (Avalon Fast); the two sense each other first through a kind of metaphysical attraction before their connection becomes a passionate new romance. Gen is far more knowledgeable about their shared witchy nature and begins guiding Anna in the use of her abilities. But in their two-person coven, Anna's innate power soon grows beyond either of their control. Matters spiral further when one of Gen's tattoos transforms its wearer into a demon-like creature.



Not all of the film's effects are convincing, and the demon bears a striking resemblance to a season one *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* baddie. Still, several elements carry *The Serpent's Skin* along. While its take on witch mythology is somewhat underdeveloped, the core concept is intriguing and effective. The film's greatest strength lies in the chemistry between its leads; McVicker and Fast convincingly embody a new couple consumed by each other, and their magnetic connection infuses every shared scene with both tenderness and mysticism. The slow-motion shots, dreamy score, and soft light-

ing enhance this mood, but much of it rests on the actresses' performances.

Grounded in naturalistic acting and accented with supernatural touches, *The Serpent's Skin* stands as another solid step in Mackay's steadily improving body of horror work.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

SIX FEET UNDERWHELMED

THE MORTUARY ASSISTANT

Starring Willa Holland, Paul Sparks and John Adams
Directed by Jeremiah Kipp
Written by Tracee Beebe and Brian Clarke
Shudder

It's never a good sign when the main character in a film screams out "What the fuck is happening?!" eleven minutes before the end, and you find yourself wondering the exact same thing.

The movie in question is an adaptation of the popular indie video game *The Mortuary Assistant*, about a young mortician battling both her personal demons and, well, actual demons. Willa Holland (2010's *Legion*) plays our titular mortuary assistant Rebecca, who is called back into work for her first night on the job at River Fields Mortuary by her kindly but shifty employer Raymond Delver (Paul Sparks, *Midnight Special*). He has asked her to process three corpses overnight, but it may come as no surprise that soon enough, the lights start flickering, the corpses start moving, and Rebecca finds herself in a battle against an evil entity that seeks a new vessel in order to enter this world. Or something like that.

If you're familiar with André Øvredal's vastly superior *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016), there isn't much reason to see *The Mortuary Assistant*. It retreads much of the same territory, minus the tension, superior acting, and clear narrative. Fans of the video game may appreciate director Jeremiah Kipp's efforts to bring it to life on-screen, but the rest of us have to endure Sparks' lifeless – some might say stiff – performance and a convoluted plot that tries to construct a world of demons but fails to explain it adequately enough for us to give a shit.

On the plus side, the production does a good job showing us the video game's standout monster, a grinning creature called the Mimic (Mark Steger, TV's *Stranger Things*), but all it does is stand around looking menacing. *The Mortuary Assistant* is, alas, dead on arrival.

SEAN PLUMMER

Noseeums

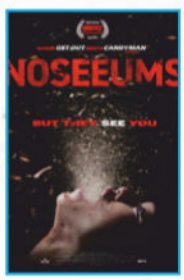
BORED OF THE FLIES

NOSEEUMS

Starring Aleigha Burt, Jasmine Gia Nguyen and Tabby Getsy
Directed by Raven Carter
Written by Jason-Michael Anthony and Hendreck Joseph
Quiver Distribution

Look, it's not that I believe that *every* horror film that addresses contemporary racism has to do it head-on, à la *Get Out* or *His House*. Nor do I think it always needs to be as finely tuned and trenchant as in the aforementioned films to be dramatically or ethically legit. But to carelessly toss it into the mix as a selling point without any apparent concern for credibility, characterization, or story structure cheapens both the story and the issue itself, as sadly evidenced in *Noseeums*. (It also means I have to slag yet another indie film. Woe is me.)

Four made-to-order hot college girls – one Black, two white, and one Asian – go spring break road-trippin' to a posh country house in north Florida. The white and Asian girls go about their boozy, weedy standard spring break movie stuff while their apparently psychically gifted Black friend Ember (Aleigha Burt) has frightening visions hinting that the land they're partying on may have been stolen from her forebears by white claim-jumpers. All of which might have made for a competently entertaining supernatural boo-fest (maybe even with some Important Underlying Messages) if it hadn't been strangled in the womb by a script so staggeringly, butt-clench-inducingly idiotic, illogical, and narratively nonsensical.



Not for lack of effort on the part of our four leads, who are surprisingly solid, albeit in service of abysmal writing. In particular Burt, who's talented, charismatic, and drop-dead gorgeous, acquits herself impressively by soldiering through the excruciating script with impressive conviction. Sadly, instead of propping up the film, this only drives home the fact that she deserves much, much better. Oh, and yes, there are noseeums or no-see-ums or sand flies or midges or whatever picayune piffle those things are called in your region, and yes, they do supernatural stuff in this movie that the regular ones don't, but, like, whatever.

JOHN W. BOWEN

GIRL GONE

SHE WAS HERE

Starring Kathleen O'Rourke, JoBeth Williams and Gary Sherman
Directed by Nick Bailey
Red Water Entertainment

The tragedy chronicled in this documentary – subtitled *The Heartbreaking True Story of Child Actress and Poltergeist Star Heather O'Rourke* – is also its paradox. In an industry rife with the wreckage of more child stars than most of us could name, O'Rourke's death at the age of thirteen was as tragic as any, yet a far cry from the all-too-accustomed scenarios. Her story is blessedly free of substance abuse, sexual or commercial exploitation at the hands of parents or the usual showbiz suspects, nor was she hounded into an

OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE SCREAMS BLOODY MASSACRE

READ THE SWINE PRINT

THE ARKANSAS PIGMAN MASSACRE

HH Entertainment Group

I was eleven years old in 1978 when my parents told me that 918 people had died by suicide in something that came to be called the Jonestown Massacre. It shook me to my very core that a group of religious people could be so misguided as to kill themselves and their children. Ever since that day, the word "massacre" has had a very real and ominous meaning for me. But apparently that word doesn't mean much to the folks behind this movie, which follows a couple of sassy twelve-year-old girls through a forest as they're hunted down by a silly man with the head of a pig… and that's about it. Obviously the director landed himself a drone for Christmas as he uses it extensively in an effort to extend the run time. Hopefully next year he'll get Adobe Premiere and learn how to edit.

BODY COUNT: 6

BEST MEAL TO HAVE WHILE WATCHING: Diet Coke and gummy bears!

DE-TOUR

BLOOD MOUNTAIN MASSACRE

Acort Global Media

There's something about an all-girl rock band that really does it for me. No, I'm not talking about The Go-Gos or The Bangles – more like L7 and The Runaways, women who could as easily fuck you through a wall as they could break your neck for looking at them the wrong way. This sick flick follows The Abortions, a group of femme fatales whose tour of backroad bars gets sidetracked when they find themselves caught between a demented serial killer and a satanic cult. Made to look like an old grindhouse classic – complete with damaged, washed-out film stock and loads of boobs and blood – *Blood Mountain Massacre* delivers some cool twists and a lot of laughs along the way. So, roll up a spliff, get a shot of penicillin, and enjoy the ride!

BODY COUNT: 18

BEST MEAL TO HAVE WHILE WATCHING: Bud Light and heroin!

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SLUMBER PARTY

PILLOW PARTY MASSACRE

Breaking Glass Pictures

When I was a horny teenager, I thought girls' sleepover parties started out with gossip about boys and ended in pillow fights and make-out sessions. Now I'm still horny and it turns out I wasn't that far off. In *Pillow Party Massacre*, a group of college girls get together at a country cottage two years after a high school prank gone awry that resulted in the death of one of their classmates. Still dealing with the guilt (or lack thereof), the girls soon discover that they're being picked off by a mysterious masked killer in black. Now I know what you're thinking: this plot is as old as a decade of slasher cinema, but these filmmakers have added a unique twist, namely, to garnish a handful of gruesome kill scenes with crappy camerawork and lousy dialogue. Does it make up for its blatant theft of better films such as *April Fool's Day*? Just go back to the slo-mo pillow fighting, I beg you!

BODY COUNT: 10

BEST MEAL TO HAVE WHILE WATCHING: Feathers and Fanta!

LAST CHANCE LANCE

early grave by scandal-hungry media. In fact, hers was a rare case in which the downfall of a tween celebrity can't even be indirectly blamed on Hollywood itself, even though, according to many reliable sources, it may well have been averted.

At the height of her fame, O'Rourke died of a gastrointestinal disorder that had been repeatedly misdiagnosed by multiple medical professionals, despite her (ostensibly) having access to better healthcare than most Americans. Up to that point, the little girl chronicled in this doc comes across as happy and well-adjusted, a rising star whose colleagues (including fellow *Poltergeist* stars JoBeth Williams and Craig T. Nelson) were consistently impressed with not only her talent, but also her extraordinary maturity and professionalism. Director Gary Sherman (*Death Line*, *Dead & Buried*), who was working on *Poltergeist III* with O'Rourke at the time of her death, recalls her lugging a camcorder around to document her experiences on set as a means of educating herself in all aspects of film and TV production. Coming from an adorable little kid, the old saw "What I really want to do is direct and produce" is cute as hell, but in O'Rourke's case it also seemed perfectly credible.

Commentary from her mother Kathleen, sister Tammy, and several childhood friends is particularly poignant; Kathleen's viscerally raw recollection of her daughter's death, even this many years later, hit me harder than I'd anticipated. Rest in peace, Carol Anne.

JOHN W. BOWEN

BEARLY A HORROR

GRIZZLY NIGHT

Starring Charles Esten, Oded Fehr and Brec Bassinger
Directed by Burke Doeren
Written by Bo Bean, Katrina Mathewson and Tanner Bean
Saban Films

Don't let its wildly misleading trailer fool you: *Grizzly Night* isn't a horror movie. The best that can be said about this unexpectedly sombre, based-on-a-true story tale about a famous and deadly series of bear attacks at Glacier National Park is that its creators clearly care deeply about the environment. Clocking in at 82 minutes (not counting the credits), the vast majority of this oddly lackadaisical film is dedicated to taking viewers through the events of August 12, 1967, in highly procedural, beat-by-beat detail, from room rates at the lodges to the garbage disposal procedures.

Flatly shot and generally poorly acted (with the exception of *The Mummy*'s Oded Fehr, who could and should be doing something better with his time), this slow, ostensible period piece is riddled with iPhone face and not-so-riddled with bears. To make matters worse, the attacks are perfunctory; only one of the three or so onscreen incidents of violence is actually shown, verbatim, twice. The dialogue is bland, though occasionally it enters the realm of unintentional comedy ("Crazy peo-

Dracula: A Love Tale

ple from the cities… they know nothing about bears," etc.). A standout moment of hilarity: almost immediately after a girl dies, the manager of the lodge approaches the chalkboard with the lunch specials. He picks up an eraser and soberly wipes the word "grizzly" from the "grizzly burger" on offer. It's meant to be deep, but it just leaves you looking at the word "burger."

You might learn something about grizzlies, or at least think about learning something about grizzlies ("Dogs and bears are natural enemies…" are they?), but you'd be incomparably better served on that score, not to mention in terms of tension, drama, and impact, by Werner Herzog's classic and devastating environmentalist documentary, *Grizzly Man*. This Redbox rendition of a fascinating true story distinguished itself most by making me want to read Jack Olsen's 1969 account of the incident, *Night of the Grizzlies*. Viewers looking to enjoy the kind of eco-horror fare this film never even really tries to be would do well to rewatch *Prophecy* instead.

PAYTON MCCARTY-SIMAS

SMELLS LIKE UNDEAD SPIRIT

DRACULA: A LOVE TALE

Starring Caleb Landry Jones, Christoph Waltz and Zoë Bleu
Written and directed by Luc Besson
Vertical

At his peak, Luc Besson's filmography was a subgenre onto itself – genre-bending bangers such as *La Femme Nikita* (1990), *Léon: The Professional* (1994), and *The Fifth Element* (1997) all had the portents of an exciting sci-fi/thriller auteur. But several scandals and stinkers put a lull in his cinematic output until recently. Is his *Dracula: A Love Tale* a return to grace or the latest nail in his career's coffin? Read on!

Here's what you already know: Prince Vlad of Wallachia (Caleb Landry Jones, *Antiviral*) was something of an impaler (both in the head-on-a-pike way and the naughty-winky-rather-gratuitously-raunchy way) until he is separated from his wife Elisabeta (Zoë Bleu). Vlad goes AWOL, denouncing God and cursing himself to eternal life as a bloodsucker, which he decides to spend in search of his immortal beloved. Blah blah blah, a visit from Jonathan Harker (Ewens Abid), enlisting the help of a weird priest standing in for Van Helsing (Christophe Waltz), and a hot redhead sidepiece for Drac in Maria (Matilda De Angelis). Goodness prevails, the end.

What you wouldn't expect from this adaptation, what you *couldn't* expect, is that Vlad's chief strategy for finding his reincarnated love is developing a *perfume* that makes him irresistible to women. Bafflingly, much runtime is spent on the development of said fragrance and drawn-out scenes of Vlad sucking entire ballrooms of women dry throughout the Classical era. It's deeply silly, but it's also hard to be mad about the absolutely bonkers musical sequence along the lines of the Diva Dance from *The Fifth Element*. I shit you

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ON THE SLAB: FRIENDS TO THE END

GOODBYE OLD FRIEND

5:57 mins/YouTube via Rafael De Leon Jr.'s Channel

Goodbye Old Friend starts in a quaint apartment where candles are lit and dinner is served – all the makings of a romantic evening, except for the dead guy on the dining room floor. Helen (Corrie Legge) is frantic and locked in the next room as someone or something tries to force its way in, but when the thing on the other side attempts to communicate, she recognizes just who has come calling. *Goodbye Old Friend* poses a frightening question about what happens to our imaginary friends when we grow up, particularly if they're displeased about being cast aside. A lifelong movie fan, NY-based director Rafael De Leon Jr. crafts a tight, creepy two-character piece that weaves an engaging narrative with very little dialogue. Look for his latest short, *Vowels*, currently touring the festival circuit.

FUNNY BUNNY

6:02 mins/YouTube via the Alter Channel

In *Funny Bunny*, a young woman (Savanah Moss) scores a much-needed gig babysitting Leah (Sloan Lucas Muldown) in a beautiful old house. As they get to know each other, the babysitter learns that Leah is very nervous about losing her teeth and tries to use her stuffed bunny to comfort the girl. However, things go off the rails once bedtime hits and a certain so-called friend shows their true colours. Snappy and well-edited, *Funny Bunny* is a popular short on YouTube thanks to its memorable imagery and ability to take the common childhood fear of losing one's teeth to a whole new level. A collaboration between writer/star Moss and director Nic Stanich, the short went from script to screen in just five weeks. Stanich is currently filming his newest project, *Goodbye Stuart*.

HOW I MET MY NEW BEST FRIEND

5:00 mins/YouTube via Nicholas Jandora's Channel

Told through the crayon drawings of an innocent seven-year-old (Marion Jandora), we hear about her life, how she likes to watch movies, how her parents are always fighting, and that her only friend in the world is a boy named Greg that she met online. As Greg promises the girl a life free of rules and fighting, their friendship grows – as does the likelihood that things will end badly for someone. *How I Met My New Best Friend* is truly a family affair, as said drawings were supplied by director Nicholas Jandora's nephew and the narration was voiced by his niece. This short was Jandora's attempt to break into the business by entering a contest and winning $5000 in funding, starting what we hope to be a long career in the genre.

JAY CLARKE

not, reader. Oh, and did I mention the CGI gargoyles that populate his castle and do his domestic chores?

Listen, we love a *Dracula* take. There will never come a day when *Rue Morgue* cries "Enough!" – especially if adaptations are going to swing as hard and as recklessly as *A Love Tale*. And though I might struggle to recommend this film with a completely straight face, I can't help but admit that it's a damn good, silly time that's probably destined for so-bad-it's-greatness. Take a sniff.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

DEEP RED DESCENT

IRON LUNG

Starring Mark Fischbach
Written and directed by Mark Fischbach
Markiplier Studios

Gamefluencer Mark "Markiplier" Fischbach has 38 million-and-counting followers on YouTube, and many of them have watched him play David Szymanski's 2022 indie first-person puzzler *Iron Lung*. So taken with the game and its gradually excavated "lore" was Markiplier, that he wrote, self-financed, and directed this film adaptation. He's also, to all intents and purposes, the only onscreen actor.

At worst, *Iron Lung* is long passages of a man saying "fuck" to himself in the dark while poking at control panels. But at best, it's an opaque narrative puzzle providing tantalizing glimpses of a pitiless Lovecraftian universe, terrifying in its infinite emptiness. The premise is that every star and planet has suddenly vanished in an event known by those surviving on space stations as the "Silent Rapture." But in an ocean of blood on a desolate remaining moon, a tiny submarine (the Iron Lung of the title) with a single occupant sinks ever deeper. It was not meant that he should voyage far.

Taking place on a single set like the sort of one-man show you might catch off-off-off Broadway or at the Edinburgh Fringe, Markiplier's film has the tang of a vanity project about it. But it's also a work of extreme and loving devotion to its source, capturing the claustrophobia while probing far beyond its limited (event) horizons, cleverly suggesting a dense crimson sea populated with gargantuan monsters while – almost – never leaving the confines of the sub.

New over-the-radio voices are introduced throughout, often distorted, making some of the dialogue intentionally hard to parse; there'll be rewatch value in deciphering and piecing together that spoken information, much of which relates to the lost ship SM-8. Also of note is the ominous ambient score by longtime game soundtracker/first-time film composer Andrew Hulshult.

And if the game elements are obvious (logic puzzles, maps, text notes and audio files left by ill-fated prior submariners, etc.), the sub's gradual deterioration is realized far more viscerally than in the primitive source visuals. By the end, as the pre-release publicity machine has been pleased to brag, *Iron Lung* has used more blood than any other film in history. Eat that, *Evil Dead* 2013.

OWEN WILLIAMS

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Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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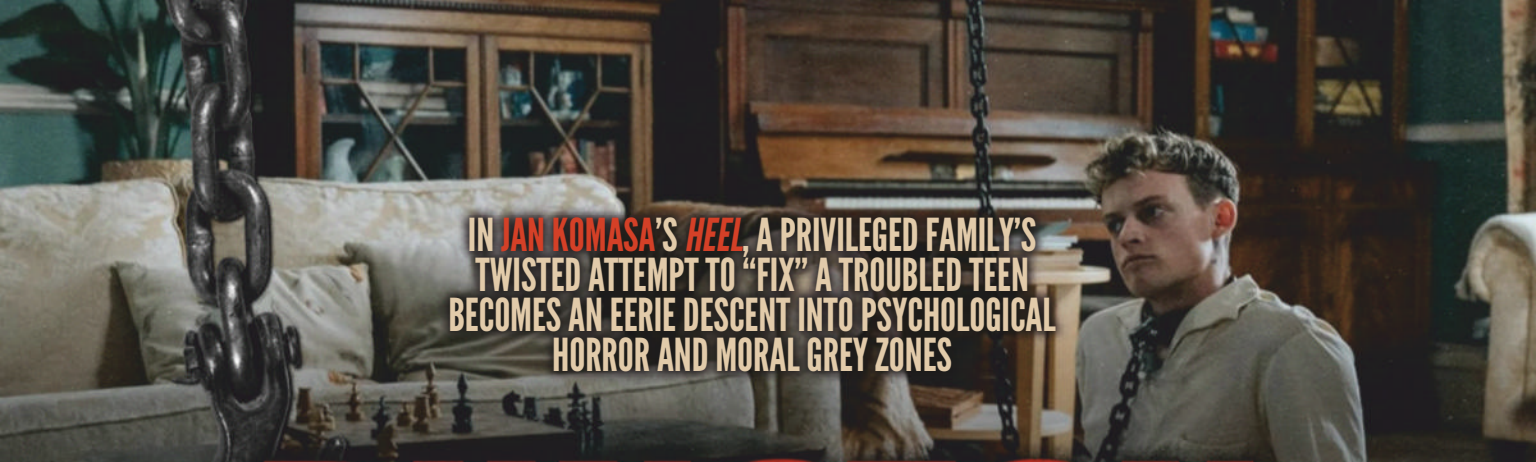

IN JAN KOMASA'S *HEEL*, A PRIVILEGED FAMILY'S TWISTED ATTEMPT TO "FIX" A TROUBLED TEEN BECOMES AN EERIE DESCENT INTO PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR AND MORAL GREY ZONES

DUNGEON THERAPY

BY ADAM CLARKE AND LENA REID

CAN A BAD PERSON BE FORCED TO BE GOOD, OR DOES REAL GOODNESS HAVE TO COME FROM WITHIN? IT'S BEEN MANY MOONS SINCE STANLEY KUBRICK TACKLED THAT IDEA WITH HIS 1971 ADAPTATION OF ANTHONY BURGESS' 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*. But filmmaker Jan Komasa's new film *Heel* (out in theatres and on demand March 6 from Magnolia) proves the concept is evergreen, with its story set in modern-day Britain, where street violence is commonplace to the point of entertainment. What's a well-meaning family with a sprawling estate and an unused cellar dungeon to do about this sordid state of affairs?

Heel begins with nineteen-year-old party boy Tommy (Anson Boon) wreaking havoc in the streets of downtown London via every vice imaginable, before we shift gears and meet Katrina (Monika Frajczyk), who is in the process of being hired by Chris (Stephen Graham: *Snatch*, *Adolescence*) as a housekeeper for his reclusive British family living on the outskirts of the city. Her job, as outlined by Chris, will be to care for the house, attend to ten-year-old Jonathan (Kit Rakusen), and refrain from bothering his strangely fragile wife Kathryn (Andrea Riseborough). The catch? Tommy is being held against his will in the cellar and forced to watch his many filmed transgressions until he's rehabilitated from his wild ways. It's a weird gig, for sure, but Katrina needs the work, so she signs an NDA and joins the strange household. Can she get on board with this situation? And what's up with Kathryn, and who's this "Charlie" they keep talking about? Most importantly, will Tommy be made to heel?

"When we premiered the film in Toronto, it was just a twisted thriller, at best," Kosama tells *Rue Morgue* when asked about *Heel*'s inability to fit neatly into any one cinematic genre. "And then people kept coming and saying this film feels like it's haunted. This film is very eerie in its information, and you don't necessarily know what's going on. So many people, when they perceive this film, they feel they're watching something closer to a ghost story."

Indeed, *Heel* (originally titled *The Good Boy* and changed for obvious reasons) is steeped in mystery, with several compelling plot threads on the go, punctuated by enigmatic declarations from Kathryn ("Destroy what destroys you," she intones at one point). And while there are certainly bouts of violence (dished out grudgingly by Chris and gleefully by Tommy), audiences expecting the typical A24 fare in the vein of *X* or *Hereditary* are in for something more character-driven and less visceral than those recent horror hits. For the Polish-born filmmaker, who earned an Oscar nom for his 2019 drama *Corpus Christi*, genre is in the eye of the beholder.

"There's a horror interpretation of this film rather than the film being a horror itself," he says. "The difference between the horror and the thriller is in thriller you don't have eerie elements. There are no paranormal elements in *Silence of the Lambs*. So, there's a grey area between the two. [*Heel* is] in this grey area."

A mixture of drama, suspense, and black comedy make *Heel* a difficult film to define – more along the lines of Yorgos Lanthimos than Jonathan Demme's 1991 crime thriller – but it contains an uncanny streak that puts it somewhere between fantasy and reality. The set-up may be straightforward, but the characters feel as though they've been pulled in from another reality. As Komasa explains, the entire story began as a surreal dream sequence before it took on decidedly darker hues.

"It was during the pandemic and there were bits and pieces in the script that were descriptive, and they described the mental states of the main character," he explains, referring to Tommy. "The main character is still [under the thrall of] heavy usage of drugs and, you know, like in *Trainspotting*, you see things. But doing the detox, you still have remnants from the period when you were taking a lot of drugs."

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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

THE FANGS OF *SALEM'S LOT* ARE EVEN SHARPER IN 4K

You kids today don't know how good you have it with your Blu-rays and your 4K UHDs (and, okay, your streaming services…). Back when I was growing up in the '70s and very early '80s, too young to see a lot of new horror films in theatres, I had to wait for them to show up on broadcast TV, often heavily cut. A key compensation, ironically, was the string of scary movies made and aired by the networks, some of them freakier and more frightening than the features playing on big screens. There was *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* and *Trilogy of Terror* and *Dark Night of the Scarecrow* and, the Mount Everest of the bunch, CBS and Tobe Hooper's two-part *Salem's Lot*.

The second Stephen King adaptation and the first that a lot of us young'uns saw, *Salem's Lot* introduced me to Hooper a few years before I was old enough (well, not really…) to see *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* on one of its rereleases. With a script by Paul Monash (who had produced Brian De Palma's *Carrie*) that expertly distilled King's novel down to the good stuff, it featured some of 1970s TV's creepiest set pieces. Danny Glick at Mark Petrie's window. The slaughter of Mark's parents before the teen's eyes. The final act in the Marsten house. Pure nightmare fuel for a generation of young viewers.

Salem's Lot also benefitted from the canny casting of a couple of familiar small-screen faces in two key roles. David Soul, who'd been busting human bad guys for four years on *Starsky & Hutch*, was heroic writer Ben Mears and, playing Mark, an innocent boy taken straight to hell, was Lance Kerwin, a teen idol from his many tube gigs including the lead in the acclaimed coming-of-age series *James at 15*. (I'd say that show was the *Dawson's Creek* of its day, but that would just date me, since *Creek* is now almost a decade older than *James at 15* was when *Creek* premiered.)

As intense as *Salem's Lot* was on CBS, it was even more so in a theatrical version prepared for other countries, which was edited down to feature length while having more graphic and gory material (filmed during the main shoot) added in. This cut eventually received U.S. exposure on VHS, and the nastier bits were edited into the original tele-version (the two halves combined into one long movie) for certain disc releases. Now, both editions of *Salem's Lot* are getting a 4K upgrade thanks to Arrow Video.

Make that three editions, as Arrow's UHD two-disc set coming March 31 offers the option to watch *Lot* as it was originally broadcast in two parts, the full-length combo, and the international theatrical version, all in new 4K restorations. Just as notably, Arrow has fully stocked this release with fresh special features. Joining an archival Hooper commentary on the TV edition is a new talk track by TV-movie historian Amanda Reyes and critic Bill Ackerman, alternate televised material, and a shooting script gallery. A whole coffin-full of original extras accompanies the theatrical *Lot*, leading off with audio commentary by journalist/filmmaker Chris Alexander and also including interviews and appreciations with King biographer Douglas Winter; frequent King filmmaker Mick Garris; author Grady Hendrix; and critics Heather Wixson, Joe Lipsett, and Trace Thurman, plus a visit to the shooting locations, the trailer, and an image gallery.

On top of that, the package contains a reversible sleeve and a double-sided poster, a Salem's Lot town sticker, and a collector's booklet. The latter features new essays by Sean Abley, Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, and Richard Kadrey, plus vintage interviews with Hooper, actress Julie Cobb, and Kerwin, the latter conducted (full disclosure) by yours truly in 2022 for *Delirium* magazine. Kerwin gave me great reminiscences about working with Hooper and his co-stars, the atypical-for-TV creative freedom they enjoyed on this project, the scariest scenes, and more. Sadly, he passed away less than a year after we spoke, in January 2023, at the age of 62. R.I.P., Mr. Kerwin, and thanks for the great work and the good words.

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT

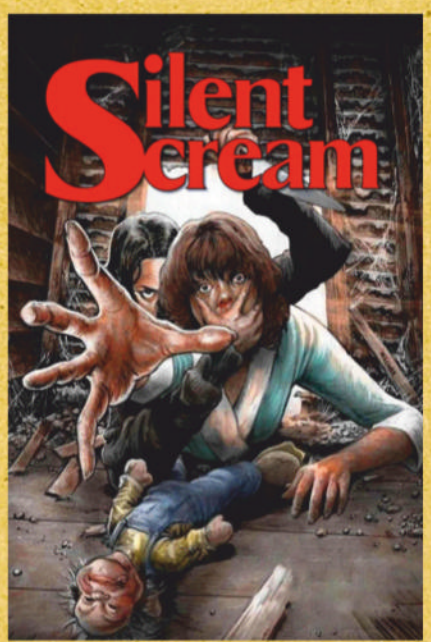
DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Send More Boogens!

by John W. Bowen

If I told you I'm just not that into the late, lovely Rebecca Balding, I'd be a big old lyin' firepants. In fact, I'm still sufficiently smitten with her after all these years that I was willing to subject myself to *The Silent Scream* (1979), solely for the pleasure of her company.

Petite, doe-eyed, mop-topped bonbon Becca B. first stole my cold dark heart back when *The Boogens* (1981 – see Bowen's Basement in *RM#121*) was unspooling at better grindhouses everywhere. I was less intrigued by her subsequent network TV career, but during her too-brief tenure as a scream queen – basically over the course of two horror flicks between 1979 and 1981 – I was pretty much full Hinckley for the girl. Furthermore, the earlier of the two movies – i.e. the one that isn't *The Boogens* – is a largely forgettable, barely coherent snoozer, even though its credits promise a veritable smorgasbord for trivia hounds.



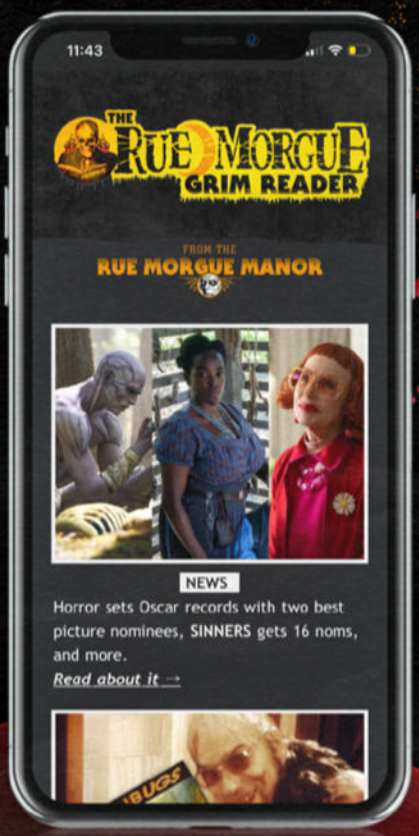
In *The Silent Scream*, Balding plays Scotty, a fresh(wo)man who arrives in an unnamed college town after virtually all student accoms have been claimed for the fall semester, leaving her forced to take lodging in a big, rambling old place way off campus by the ocean. Here, Scotty and three other students rent rooms from an exceedingly dorky, maladjusted latter-day Norman Bates-type named Mason Engels (Brad Rearden) and his even weirder, seldom-seen mother (Yvonne De Carlo – yes, *her*!). The tenants agree that things could be worse – I mean, creepy landlords aside, at least they're on the damn beach, right? But then one of them gets stabbed to death on the sand one drunken night, which kind of harshes the buzz, even though the victim is the obnoxious, semi-date-rapey rich guy none of them liked anyway. Cops investigate, next to no clues are gleaned, and the remaining souls attempt to get on with their lives, with varying degrees of success. There are, of course, romantic couplings, uncouplings, and near-couplings juxtaposed with more murders and growing evidence that the house is housing more tenants than the landlords have disclosed.

The rather tepid, intermittently coherent slasher fare that ensues combines bits of *Psycho* with apparent hints of *The Unseen* (which wouldn't see release for another year) and the soon-to-be-hugely popular V.C. Andrews novel *Flowers in the Attic* (published near-simultaneously). Prolific genre film and TV tough guy Cameron Mitchell and comedy veteran Avery Schreiber make for an odd couple of detectives and horror icon Barbara Steele (seriously!) plays a character I can't really describe without spoilering the hell out of the whole sloppy mess. Know what *really* doesn't help? An opening title sequence that shows us the final sequence in slo-mo, which – *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*-style – makes absolutely zero sense until you see it in its proper context at the end. ("W.T.F., Bowen!?" Yeah, exactly.)

Still, the most salient point that can really be made here is that the whole project began life in virtually unrecognizable form two years earlier with an almost entirely different cast before being radically rewritten and reshot. By most accounts, including the estimations of the producers, approximately fifteen percent of what wound up onscreen is all that's left of the original version. Should you be thankful that they wound up with a movie at all? Maybe. Or maybe not, depending on how you feel about the marginally entertaining trainwreck that ended up on the screen.

Me? I'm happy just to moon over more Rebecca Balding footage, albeit in service of a movie that, by all rights, shouldn't have survived its own birthing process. Well, the night's still young, so get the hell out of my basement and see if you can't hunt down a few Boogens to resurrect and maybe liven things up a bit.

THE RUE MORGUE GRIM READER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RUE MORGUE MANOR
NEWS
Horror sets Oscar records with two best picture nominees, SINNERS gets 16 noms, and more.
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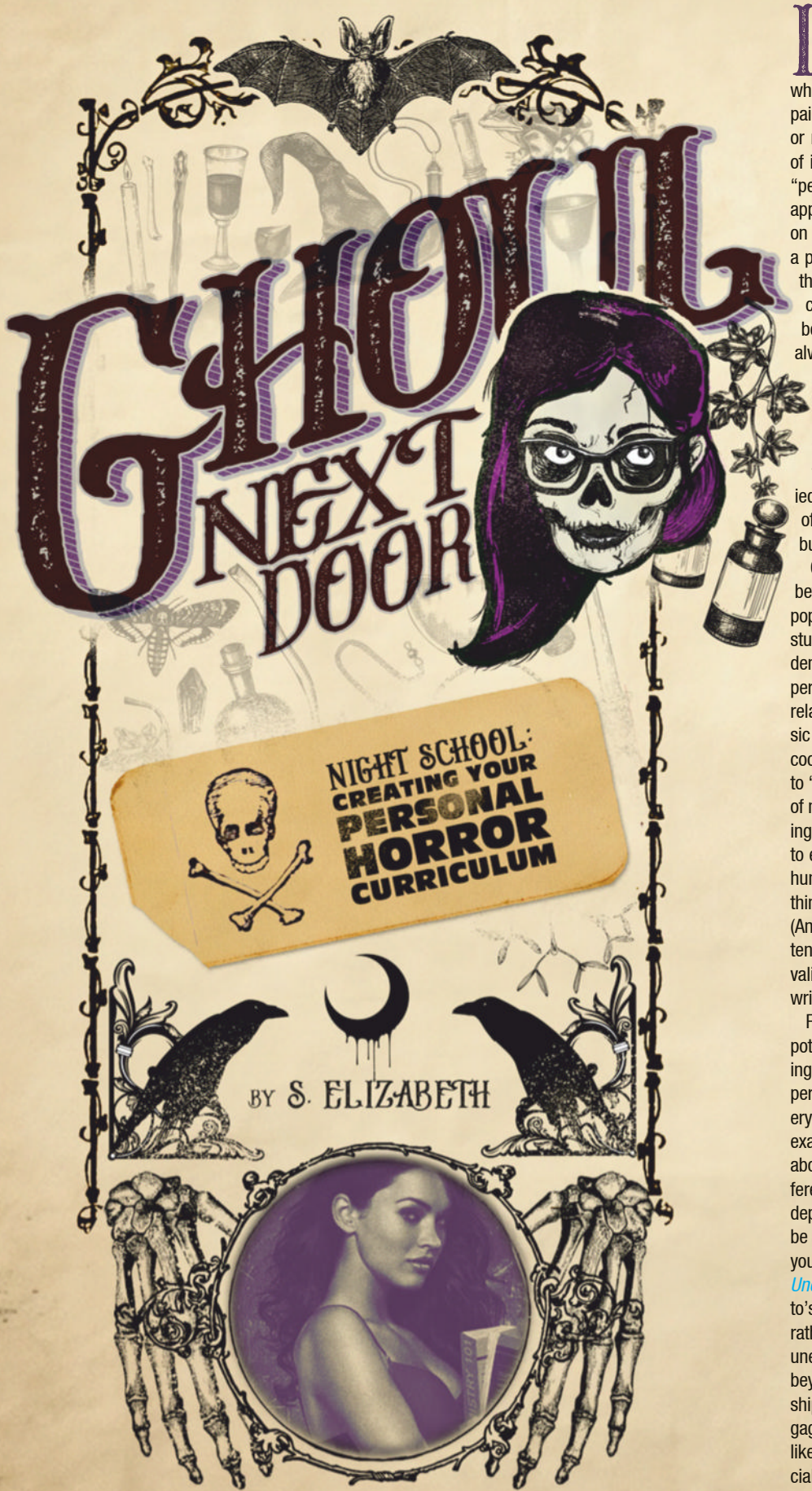


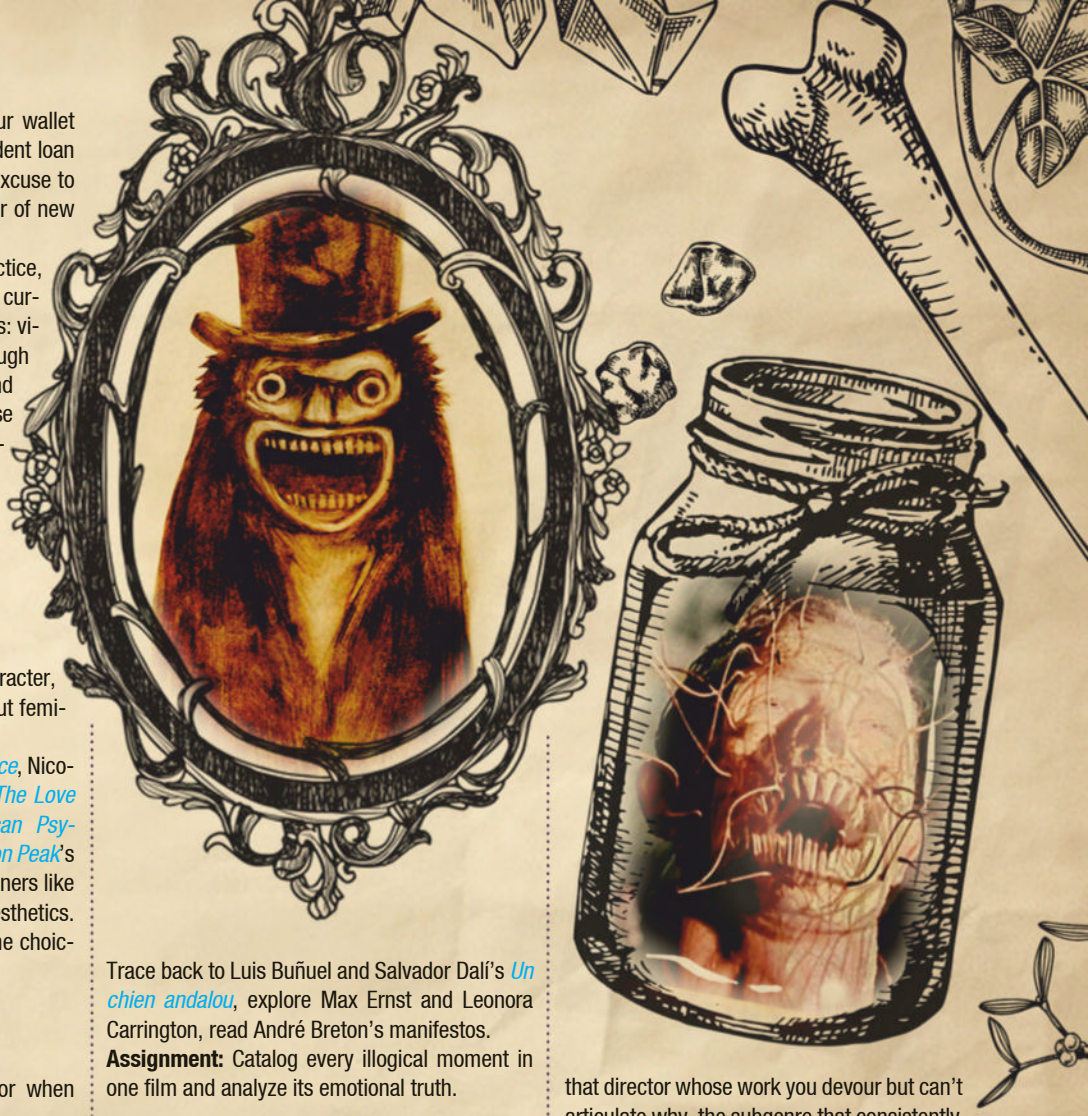
I'M THE SORT OF PERSON WHO PAUSES HORROR FILMS TO ADMIRE THE COSTUME DESIGN, who notices when a shot mirrors a Caravaggio painting, and who gets chills from certain lighting or musical choices – but I can't explain why any of it works! So, when I stumbled across TikTok's "personal curriculum" trend, where Gen-Zers are apparently assigning themselves monthly syllabi on topics from sourdough to astrophysics, I had a painfully obvious revelation: why wasn't *I* doing this for horror? I'd spent years researching occult symbolism and macabre aesthetics for my books and blog, but my horror education has always run on pure instinct: picking the most lurid VHS covers from Blockbuster as a teenager (still a legit strategy!), scrolling through Shudder thumbnails at midnight as an adult, watching compulsively, understanding little, retaining next to nothing. I've never actually studied any of the genre formally or intentionally (short of reading *Rue Morgue*), so it was clearly time to build my own curriculum.

Credit goes to TikTok content creator Elizabeth Jean (username @xparmesanprincessx) for popularizing this recent approach to self-directed study. Jean's videos went viral in 2024, and suddenly thousands of people were creating their own personal courses of study on everything from the relationship between good and evil through classic literature to the history of the chocolate chip cookie. It exploded because it offered an antidote to "brain rot," that term for the endemic complaint of mental fog from too much mindless doomscrolling. And while "brain rot" sounds like a fun thing to explore in a horror context, we flesh-and-blood humans with meat-suit craniums full of organic thinky-noodles don't want that shit to rot for real. (And if you've been studying your interests this intentionally all along, unprompted by social media validation, that's wonderful. You're very smart. I'm writing this for the rest of us bozos.)

For horror fans, personal curriculums have the potential to scratch a deeply specific and satisfying itch. We already do this accidentally, though perhaps innately: that week you spent reading everything about Ed Gein after watching *Psycho*, for example, or the month you couldn't stop thinking about Japanese ghost folklore after *Ringu*. The difference is in giving that obsession structure and depth. Here's what you gain: critical literacy. You'll be able to articulate why *The Babadook* devastates you in ways *Poltergeist* doesn't, why the score in *Under the Skin* is so deeply unsettling, why Argento's Technicolor excess in *Suspiria* amplifies dread rather than beauty and creates such nightmarish unease – it fosters community and conversation beyond "It was scary." You reclaim your relationship with the genre, slowing down to actually engage rather than mechanically checking off films like some kind of spooky accountant. And crucially, you get permission to take your obsessions seriously in a culture that still treats horror fandom as something to outgrow. Best of all? Personal

curriculums don't require emptying your wallet for tuition fees or accruing massive student loan debt. (I am, however, using this as an excuse to purchase an absolutely obscene number of new notebooks.)

So, what does this look like in practice, aside from blank journal hoarding? My curriculum reflects my particular obsessions: visual analysis, emotional processing through narrative, art historical movements, and questions about who gets to tell these stories. Yours will look completely different, but here are four examples from my curriculum, shaped by years of art book research and maintaining a blog about darkly romantic grotesqueries.



FASHION IN HORROR: KILLER WARDROBES

How does costume design create character, signal danger, and reflect anxieties about femininity and power?

Study: Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace*, Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon*, *The Love Witch*'s performed femininity, *American Psycho*'s designer labels as uniform, *Crimson Peak*'s Gothic costume porn. Explore how designers like Alexander McQueen draw from horror aesthetics.

Assignment: Analyze one film's costume choices scene by scene.

GRIEF'S MONSTERS: HOW HORROR PROCESSES LOSS

Why do we turn to supernatural horror when dealing with death?

Explore: *The Babadook*, *Hereditary*, *The Orphanage*, both *Pet Sematary* versions, and *Relic*.

Read: Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Megan Devine's *It's OK That You're Not OK* (both book and podcast).

Assignment: Connect a personal loss to a horror film's supernatural processing.

SURREALISM IN HORROR: DREAMS, AUTOMATISM, AND THE UNREAL

How do surrealist techniques create subconscious dread?

Study: David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and *Inland Empire*, Andrzej Đuławski's *Possession*, Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*, Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse*, David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. Trace back to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou*, explore Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington, read André Breton's manifestos.

Assignment: Catalog every illogical moment in one film and analyze its emotional truth.

WOMEN BEHIND THE CAMERA: BEYOND THE FINAL GIRL

What happens when women control the narrative, not just survive it?

Study: Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark*, Julia Ducournau's *Raw* and *Titane*, Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body*, Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance*. Read Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* and Alexandra West's *Gore-Geous*.

Assignment: Analyze how one female-directed film subverts or complicates the Final Girl trope.

BUILDING YOUR OWN PERSONAL CURRICULUM

Start with what genuinely haunts you: films you've watched five times but never analyzed, that director whose work you devour but can't articulate why, the subgenre that consistently gets under your skin. Give yourself a timeframe (a month, a semester) but stay flexible. Take actual notes, whether pen and paper, digital doc, or voice memos. Join or create a study group (Reddit, Discord, horror book clubs). Look for free resources like library streaming, academic articles on JSTOR, museum websites, and YouTube video essays. Set assignments for yourself: write reviews, create visual mood boards, host screening parties where you actually discuss the film afterward.

Class is in session and, unlike *Suspiria*'s Tanz Academy or *The Faculty*'s invasion-plagued Herrington High, nobody's going to die. Probably! The only casualty is your ability to watch horror passively ever again…

IN THIS ISSUE

MAMA CAME CALLIN'
Ezra Claytan Daniels and Camilla Sucre
William Morrow

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Rafael Scavone and Eduardo Ferigato
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THE GHOSTLY DARKNESS OF KANATA VOLUME 1
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NEVER BY NIGHT VOLUME 2
Jonathan Chance and various
Snowyworks

STARTLING TALES OF SANTA CLAUS 2025 ANNUAL
Benito Cereno and various
Image

I AM THEIR SILENCE
Jordi Lafebre
Dark Horse Books

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

According to urban legend, deep in Florida's Asurupa County lives the Gator Man: with the body of a human and head of an alligator, he is a figure to be feared by kids and adults alike. But for five-year-old Kirah, that legend becomes all too real when she and her mother are attacked by the Gator Man and barely survive the assault. Even more horrifying, Kirah's own father is convicted of donning a gator mask and trying to kill his family. Did he finally succumb to the pressure of his wealthy white family who opposed his marrying an African American woman?

Mama Came Callin' starts on a disturbing note and rarely lets up, exploring a number of unsettling themes such as racism, cultural identity, and abuse, among its slasher trappings.

"My brother used to live in Gainesville and I'd spent Christmases there," says writer Ezra Claytan Daniels. "There was something really wild to me about the dichotomy between these really wealthy yankees who just wintered there, and the poorer native Floridians. At first, I wanted to write a gonzo crime caper exploring the tension between those worlds. But I knew it was missing something, so I just kind of sat on it. Eventually I realized what was missing, and it came down to digging as deep as I possibly could and opening myself up: my own insecurities, fears, and struggles with identity."

The story picks up twenty years later. Kirah is now an adult, but her childhood trauma continues to haunt her, and those scars suddenly reopen when her father abruptly reappears, proclaiming his innocence. But before he can prove it, he falls victim to what appears to be a new Gator Man rampage. Now Kirah must come to terms with her past abuse and her biracial heritage, while avoiding the new Gator Man's escalating attacks.

Kirah's struggles are accentuated by Camilla Sucre's striking artwork, primarily rendered in greyish blues with strategic splashes of yellow. It's a unique creative decision that provides the story with a sombre, yet often whimsical, fairy-tale feel.

Mama Came Callin': *A sombre horror fairy tale set deep in the heart of Florida swampland.*

"I give all the credit for the execution to Camilla," says Daniels, "but we spent a lot of time early on trying to figure out the technical approach to the art, whether it would be full colour or black and white. We landed on this duotone look: super dark blue and noxious yellow (which blend to make a swampy green) because we were trying to capture some of the feeling of being in a Florida swamp. Camilla and I were both attracted to an off-kilter, more expressionistic representation of that rather than using literal colours."

This off-kilter approach also lends itself to Daniels' exploration of headier themes, allowing them to strike a chord with the reader without becoming too heavy-handed. It also helps that the writer has crafted a compelling horror mystery within which to explore issues of a highly personal nature.

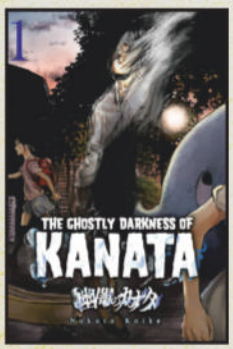
"It basically ended up being about me, a person with both a white parent and a Black parent, reconciling my heritage on both sides of America's original sin," he says. "That really became the thematic glue of the story, and it just lends itself really naturally to horror. That's where the Gator Man was born, this faceless spectre stalking you from the shadows. You have no idea who's under the mask. It could be anybody. It could be everybody. It could be in your head. You don't know why he's doing this. All you know is that he's always been with you and he won't stop until you confront him."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

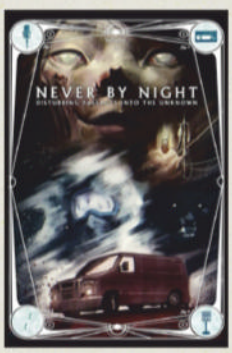
QUICK CUTS

Tim Beacon is a hard-working dentist in the small, snowbound town of Hailstone, Montana, hit hard by the Great Depression. An overall decent fellow, Beacon is nevertheless tempted when he is approached by a band of ruffians who have their eye on one of his more lucrative patients: Mr. Auberon. A wealthy (and highly unlikeable) man, Auberon has been replacing all of his teeth with gold dentures, literally putting his money where his mouth is. Beacon has been asked to help with illicit extraction and much of the issue is spent on his moral struggle, but once his decision is made, the bloodgates open and it soon becomes clear the perpetrators are going to get more than they bargained for. *Devil's Luck: A Hailstone Story* combines strong characterization with moody atmosphere and solid hints of the supernatural for an effective first issue. While the reader gets a good handle on Beacon, Auberon deliberately remains enigmatic, though there are strong suggestions of a liaison with an occult power that will undoubtedly drive the remainder of the narrative.

Kanata sees dead people. In fact, she sees so many of them that she's become rather blasé about it. Others around her are not so fortunate, and a good portion of *The Ghostly Darkness of Kanata Volume 1* relates encounters with apparitions that leave witnesses permanently scarred. While there are plenty of eerie and disturbing moments, the driving force of the book is Kanata as she tries to come to terms with her role as a bridge between the realms of the living and the dead. Is she merely a passive witness? An advisor to those who seek ghosts? A guardian who warns people and prevents them from making contact with the other world? Or does she simply want to drown her sorrows in can after can of Japanese beer? Kanata plays all those roles throughout the course of the first issue before ultimately rediscovering fear and her dark destiny.



Never By Night *Volume 2* is a collection of four stories written by Jonathan Chance that provides a good mix of eerie content highlighting the author's versatility. Chance excels at coming up with clever premises: in "Late Night Host," the new star of the hit *Late Show* becomes the victim of an alien parasite, with serious consequences on his mind, body, and ratings; "Video Van Man" sees an enterprising young fellow named Bob capitalizing on the UK video nasties hysteria of the late 1980s by renting tapes out of the back of his van while holding his customers to the highest standards; and "Collect Them All" flashes forward to the '90s, where a young girl and her grandpa fall victim to a lick-and-stick tattoo during a birthday outing at a pizza parlour. Only "Now All Is Silver Blue" falls somewhat flat in its post-apocalyptic tale about a father desperately trying to protect his family. Despite its gruesome conclusion, insufficient time is spent with the characters to make a strong enough connection with the reader. The other three tales, however, more than make up for the dud, with good use of humour, plenty of twists, and some genuine emotion.



If nothing else, I'm indebted to *Startling Tales of Santa Claus* for teaching me about the Caga Tio, Catalonia's traditional pooping log. Although Santa's name is front and centre (and he features in many of the tales), the book is chock full of other Christmas legends and folk characters. Of course, Krampus makes an appearance, but there are also stories about the Klaubauf, Santa's chef Piet, wild huntsman Hans Von Hackenberg and his killer owl, and Schmutzli, St. Nick's sooty companion. There's also a Lovecraftian cult thrown in for good measure in "An Old-Fashioned Holiday" in which a girl, anxious to experience Christmas for the first time, accompanies her friend Mattie to her hometown of Kingsport, where they celebrate the holidays "differently." Inspired by Lovecraft's story "The Festival," it's a strong blend of horror, action, humour, and good old-fashioned Christmas spirit.

At the request of one of her friends and patients, psychiatrist Eva attends the reading of a living will belonging to the matriarch of the wealthy, wine-making Monturos family. Unfortunately for Eva, she becomes enmeshed in a murder mystery when one of the key beneficiaries is found poisoned, and she emerges as the prime suspect. Complicating matters, Eva herself is suffering from a bipolar episode. As Eva tries to grasp onto her sanity with the help of her own psychiatrist, she's also determined to solve the mystery and elude arrest (and possibly her own murder). *I Am Their Silence* presents a fascinating protagonist: quirky, no-nonsense, and somewhat reckless, Eva's actions are counterbalanced by the constant presence of her ghostly chorus, who provide guidance, humour, and sarcasm in equal measure. It makes for a surprisingly funny and touching story that is highly entertaining yet never belittles the mental health issues at its core.

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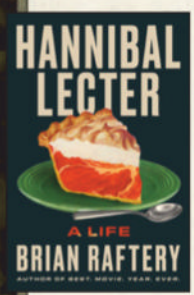
HANNIBAL LECTER: A LIFE

Brian Raftery

Simon & Schuster

He's out there somewhere; the man who has captivated so many for so long, yet few who get close to him can reveal much. To contact him is to be civilly teased, rejected, or both. While this could be said for the fictional Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter, it also extends to Lecter's creator, Thomas Harris, as author Brian Raftery recounts in *Hannibal Lecter: A Life*.

Save for an in-depth television interview in 2019, Harris remains a reluctant interviewee. Raftery recounts a story about a *Newsweek* contributor who requested an interview with the reclusive author and received a firm rejection that could be seen as a challenge: "Good luck getting information for your story."



It's easy to imagine any of the screen Hannibals delivering that line. A whimsical threat from Sir Anthony Hopkins. A cold, ominous warning from Brian Cox's "Lecktor." A low, purring whisper from Mads Mikkelsen's Hannibal, equal parts promise of danger and a sexual come-on. That so many actors find new elements to portray in the character shows how iconic Hannibal has become.

Wisely shifting his focus from Harris, Raftery has plenty to share regarding the development and release of the author's books, their film and television adaptations, and the key to Harris' and Hannibal's fame: a growing interest in serial killers following their increased media coverage. *A Life* details how, within the safe confines of fiction, Hannibal became a pop culture icon. Raftery even mentions President Trump's (many) recent references to the fictional cannibal. Granted, there's not much to explore there, save for the tenuous word association of immigrants seeking asylum and a dangerous killer lurking within an asylum in *Silence of the Lambs*. Nonetheless, this unlikely link between a U.S. president and a serial killer solidifies Lecter as America's favourite cannibal (sorry, Leatherface!); a character as iconic as Godzilla or Santa Claus. Raftery's book is a must for any fan of *Red Dragon*, its adaptations, and its sequels amid the Hannibalverse.

ADAM CLARKE

BEYOND ZOMBIE POLITICS: THE ART OF GEORGE A. ROMERO'S CINEMA

Adrienne Boutang, Claire Cornillon, and David Roche, eds.

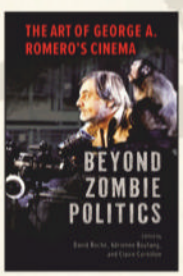
University Press of Mississippi

Started as an academic conference in 2022, *Beyond Zombie Politics: The Art of George A. Romero's Cinema* feels much like attending such a conference, wholly focused on the grandfather of zombie cinema. As noted in the title, subtitle, and a few times in the book's introduction, this is not a book that talks about Romero's politics, which burst through his movies with gusto. Rather, this collection of essays is meant to look at other facets of his works, specifically his art and motifs.

Essays are loosely organized into three sections: identity, visual motifs, and collaboration/adaptation. And while the intention is to stay within those brackets, it is difficult to talk about Romero's films without ever tipping a hat to his themes and cultural context. But rather than focus on them, the writers set out to make their own arguments about their chosen topics.

Unlike a "making of" book or an oral history, these academic analyses are primarily concerned with the observed effects of Romero's choices, and the patterns and consequences of those decisions. For example, Hélène Frazik's essay on confinement looks at the way that trope functions and how that amplifies his messages rather than considering the cost savings of chamber film productions. The discussions within *Beyond Zombie Politics* are rhetorical and encourage their readers to look at Romero's work from vantages not often explored in studies of his films.

Of particular interest are the essays on editing (Pierre Jailloux) and library music (Kingsley Marshall). These two stand out in their effectiveness at elevating the often-unnoticed tools Romero used to enhance his worlds. Each Romero film has its own tempo (both visual and musical), and these two essayists seemingly bring their own highlighters to these familiar films and call attention to the filmmaker's potentially unacknowledged efforts.



Beyond Zombie Politics has the full blessing of Romero's widow, Suzanne Desrocher-Romero, and it even includes an interview with her following the book's introduction. Academic endeavours such as this collection are one way to keep Romero's memory alive and to keep newer audiences coming back for more.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

ICONS OF THE FANTASTIC

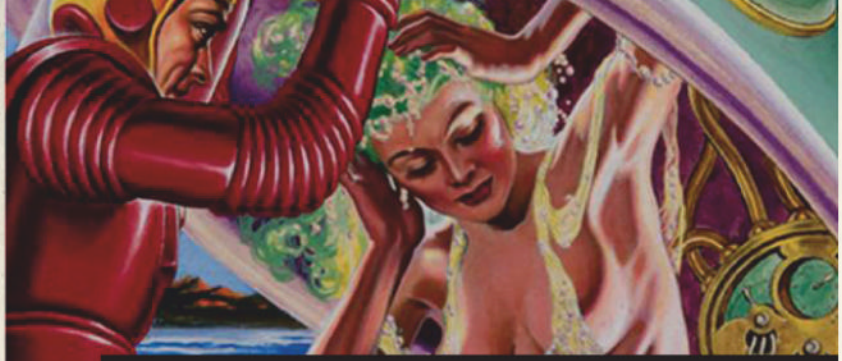
Amanda T. Zehnder and David M. Brinley, eds.

University of Delaware Press

The Korshak Collection is among the most important fantastic art collections in the world, but *Icons of the Fantastic* is much more than a catalogue. It covers over 160 years of imaginative illustrations whose sense of wonder goes from surreal to deeply unnerving to nightmarish. "The numinous and uncanny lie side by side in the images on these pages," writes Guillermo del Toro in his foreword.

Kevin J. Anderson's preface suggests that readers "Take a journey across the galaxy, or into wondrous fantasy lands, or deep into the twisted depths of hell." This would imply that sci-fi, fantasy, and horror are equally represented here. However, these artworks originated in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century, when clear divisions between the three genres did not exist. Thus, scary imagery is not limited to the overtly gothic and supernatural (e.g. Robert Lawson's "The House of Usher" or Hannes Bok's "Pickman's Model") but spreads much wider. The "little people" from Arthur Rackham's "The Sleep of Rip Van Winkle" wouldn't be out of place in an Arthur Machen tale, while Frank R. Paul's "Seeds from Space" features walking alien plants that look uncannily like Lovecraft's Elder Things. The thing from Bok's cover for "Who Goes There?" is only nominally sci-fi, but who's to decide whether James Avati's hellscape in "Deathworld 2" depicts another planet, or the Cenobites' realm?

As Michael Dirda reminds us in his introduction, "commercial origins don't preclude the creation of things of beauty." Artists from the American pulps (Virgil Finlay, Margaret Brundage) rightly stand here next to Euro-



Icons of the Fantastic: Other Worlds Science Stories *artwork by Virgil Finlay.*

peans (Aubrey Beardsley, Edmund Dulac, Władysław T. Benda) and their successors (J.K. Potter, Michael Whelan). Enlightening scholarly essays elevate this lavishly illustrated coffee-table book into a must-have study of the connections between darkly fantastic literature and art.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

TALES OF OCCULT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Maria J. Pérez Cuervo, ed.
Hellebore

In *RM#206* we recommended *The Hellebore Guide to Occult Britain and Northern Ireland*, the non -fictional coverage of sites in the British Isles most imbued with deep history, myth, and ghostliness. Now comes a worthy sequel: a collection of nine tales by leading British authors, set at the spooky locations from the previous book.

For the sense of a place to be most powerfully evoked, it has to be experienced through the eyes of a vivid, intriguing character. In Reggie Oliver's "Funeral at St Botolph's," a struggling painter enters a Faustian bargain when he's hired to paint a landscape around the titular old church. A boy scout is lost in The New Forest during "Night Exercises" by Verity Holloway, where he encounters a peculiar hermit snake-catcher. A recent widower, empowered by grief, is taken by the fairies at Doon Hill, Scotland, in Helen Grant's "The Seeds of Time." In Steve Duffy's "King of the Island" a loner is unsure if, post-COVID, he needs any company while a man is desperately trying to hire his boat so he can be crowned on Bardsey Island, said to be the burial site of 20,000 holy men and royals.

Also quite fine are Ramsey Campbell's "More Than a Sign" and "Pollen" by Steve Toase. The setting of London's Highgate Cemetery is more intriguing than the characters in "Swain's Lane" by Nina Antonia, and the same goes for "Lake of Sorrows" by Eóin Murphy, set on an Irish mystical mountain. "Wild Edric's Ride" from Ally Wilkes will be well-suited to those who like when authors' explicit politics masquerade as "horror."

This beautifully designed and illustrated book ends with the helpful appendix "About the locations," should you dare to visit the sites that inspired these highly atmospheric tales.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

BODIES OF WORK

Clay McLeod Chapman
Titan Books

The trope of serial killing as a perverse form of art is far from unprecedented, but Clay McLeod Chapman's novella *Bodies of Work* takes it to a new place, literally, inspired by a real

DANTE'S PICK

NEW WRITINGS IN HORROR & THE SUPERNATURAL, VOLUME THREE

Stephen Jones, ed.
PS Publishing

Much-awarded editor Stephen Jones uses the moniker of a British anthology series from 1971 which died after only two volumes (both recently reprinted by PS Publishing in a single edition) and resurrects it into a venue for original stories from established names in the field.

Ramsey Campbell, veteran of the ancient volumes, is back updating M.R. James' "Count Magnus" in "Nothing but Pictures," where 21st-century technology enables a single woman's haunting to be relayed to her mother via a cellphone's camera and internet. There's poignant social commentary in Simon Kurt Unsworth's depiction of exploitation on "The Fish Platform," the inhuman evil of implied child abuse in an all-boys' school in Reggie Oliver's "Crocodile Jam," Lisa Morton's melancholy dread of impending dementia in "Forgetting," and a hunt for a cursed film in Caitlín R. Kiernan's "Dark-Adapted Eyes," a short version of her novella *Zoetrope Bizarre*.

The cream of the crop is in the book's second half. David J. Schow's "Indenture" is a stellar mixture of *Sunset Boulevard*, vintage King, and Algernon Blackwood, where a down-on-his-luck man is hired for a weird job in a decrepit Hollywood hotel. In Michael Marshall Smith's witty "Charlie Wordsworth and his Host of Fucking Daffodils," a seasoned thug is hired to kill his best mate, disregarding the latter's Gypsy mother. Sharon Gosling's novelette about a solitary hiker unwittingly crossing the line in the deserted parts of the isle where *The Wicker Man* (1973) was shot is not "Ending in Ruin," but concludes this book with a bang!

There's a variety of themes and approaches here: social justice worries and pleasingly old-fashioned fearmongers, meta-horror, and just-horror, but with plentiful surprises, nasty for the characters but enjoyable for the readers. Ultimately, this high-quality volume deserves to jump-start a long-lasting series of new writings.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

SHY GIRL, MIA BALLARD'S NOVEL OF QUIET FEMININE RAGE, TAKES THE WORLD OF EXTREME HORROR LIT BY STORM

A WOMAN'S FURY

BY RACHEL MEGHAN

EXTREME HORROR IS A SUBGENRE TYPICALLY DOMINATED BY MALE AUTHORS, TO THE POINT THAT, IN MANY OF THESE STORIES, THE EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN HAS BECOME AN ALMOST EXHAUSTED TROPE. SO WHEN A FEMME AUTHOR emerges, it's a much-needed breath of fresh air. Meet Mia Ballard. After self-publishing two horror novels – beginning with 2024's *Sugar* – and a novella through her imprint Galaxy Press, her latest book, *Shy Girl*, was picked up by Orbit's Run For It following a successful indie run, catapulting her strange feminist horror story into the spotlight.

Out April 7, *Shy Girl* follows Gia, a young woman with OCD who is broke and struggling. She meets Nathan, a seemingly mild-mannered man, on a sugar dating app, and he makes her a simple offer that will solve all of her money problems: live as his human dog for eight hours a day. The collar, the cage, the leash – the whole bit. Nathan insists that Gia is free to end the arrangement whenever she wants, but desperation clouds her choices. What follows is as disturbing as it is bloody.

Despite the often brutal subject matter, Ballard writes in thoughtful, flowing prose, bringing depth and life to the narrative and ultimately allowing Gia to discover her own power and unleash her inner bitch. While the novel touches on nearly every trigger imaginable – from sexual assault and cannibalism to unflinching gore – it is also, when viewed as a whole, resoundingly empowering.

"I didn't want to wait for permission to tell the story, so I first self-published *Shy Girl*," explains Ballard, who trusted the work to find its audience organically rather than chasing publishing trends. "Everything about it, including the cover, rollout, and readers, was created by me."

Critical response to *Shy Girl* has been varied, though this is hardly surprising given that the visceral body horror and depictions of sexual abuse are enough to leave some readers deeply unsettled. Ballard notes, however, that many readers, particularly those who are femme-identifying, strongly relate to Gia and her predicament, which she considers a more meaningful measure of the book's success.

"In the best way possible, the response has been divisive," says Ballard. "Some readers find it extremely upsetting, some are appreciative, and some feel vulnerable. Women who identify with Gia, even if they don't want to, tend to have the strongest reactions."

While some horror aims to deliver little more than jump scares, books like *Shy Girl* allow for deep character study and an examination of real human struggles, enabling readers to feel at home with the story – seen, even – despite its challenging content.

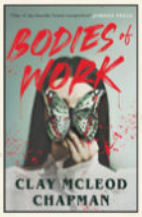
"Quiet rage was the source of *Shy Girl*," Ballard admits. "I was intrigued by how girls are taught to be small, courteous, and obedient in order to survive, and how that expectation is violent in and of itself. Extreme horror felt like the most honest way to describe that experience. I didn't want to soften anything or turn suffering into something enjoyable."

Feminine rage is currently enjoying a moment in contemporary literature, celebrated for allowing women to experience danger and transgression from the safety of the page while exploring darker curiosities in a healthy way. Gia may endure horror and humiliation beyond comprehension in *Shy Girl*, but her story carves out space for female characters to suffer without being stripped of their agency. Some readers may look away from these particular frights, but Ballard challenges them to stare straight into the abyss.

"For me, feminism is about speaking the truth, even when it's unpleasant, uncomfortable, or offensive," she says. "It's not about empowerment slogans. Horror gives women permission to be monstrous, and that felt essential."

American artist's engrossing fantasy world.

The book's Winston Kemper is an aging church custodian whose apparent piety belies his secret life as the creator of the Nether Realm. He manifests this surreal storyscape as a work of fiction thousands of pages long, as well as in mural-sized pieces that combine drawing, tracing, and collage. There, the Butterfly Girls – a sisterhood of winged, horned fairy types – battle evil hordes to free the realm's enslaved children.



Interestingly, it's *Bodies of Work*'s narrators, the Butterfly Girls themselves, who inform the reader, mostly in first-person plural, with the sisters often breaking out of the chorus to comment individually. They understand Kemper's project from the inside out because they are his captive "muses," murdered in the real world and then, by a gruesome ritual, transformed and trapped in his tales. Chapman's story begins as Kemper takes his latest victim, which turns out to be a catalyst the killer never expected.

Kemper's work – minus the murder – is based on the art of Henry Darger, the outsider artist whose mass of secretly created fantasy was discovered shortly before his death in 1973. Kemper's Nether Realm is a version of Darger's Realms of the Unreal, which Chapman fully acknowledges in his afterword.

It's a fascinating starting point for a work of fiction, and one fraught with challenges. Pulling off the precarious premise of making Kemper's fantasy world in some way real is a difficult feat that recalls Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* and Catriona Ward's *The Last House on Needless Street*. But Chapman succeeds admirably, and *Bodies of Work* is a worthy addition to his own corpus.

KARL RICHTER

THE DARKNESS GREETED HER

Christina Ferko

Sourcebooks Fire

If decades of horror have taught us anything, it's that well-intentioned trips to cabins in the woods for rest and recouperation rarely result in anything of the sort. And so it goes for the teenage girls who've been sent to a technology-free therapy camp in the American Appalachians.

Given that, it's surprising how long the supernatural hijinks take to truly get brewing. While the first eerie hints of what's to come begin to appear shortly after the girls arrive at camp, the horror doesn't fully kick in until roughly the midway point of this 416-page young adult novel, after which the pace rarely lets up. Instead, the first half of the story is largely spent introducing the camp and the characters, though given their own inherent suspicions about one another, what's learned is somewhat limited. Readers glean just as much, if not more, about them from the hallucinatory manifestations of their traumas (whiskey bottles, a beeping heart monitor, and pine air fresheners, for example) and the interstitial chapters that take us back into each camper's turbulent history.

The creature stalking them uses the girls' triggers to startling and noteworthy effect, causing reality to melt into dangerous surreal landscapes where the teens are hunted (and haunted) by manifestations of their worst fears. Can the campers identify the creature and how to stop it before it tears out all their hearts?

The Darkness Greeted Her doesn't shy away from gruesome death or putting mental health struggles front and centre (main character Penny, for instance, suffers from Harm OCD in which a voice in her head is constantly telling her to hurt people), but the story's odd pacing and a monster whose reality-bending ability is the most interesting thing about it, keep the book from being a true page-turner.

Should you go into the woods today, you already know what you will find: something hungry. Do you greet it or run?

MONICA S. KUEBLER

LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

DEADLY DISCOVERIES

There are few things I enjoy more than visiting horror cons and book expos to seek out genre authors and presses I've never heard of before. Call it the thrill of discovery. Given how long I've worked in horror, you might think this an increasingly difficult endeavour but, as it turns out, there's always someone doing something new and interesting – or simply undiscovered – especially in the small press world. Case in point: Hamilton, Ontario's Stelliform Press, whom I first encountered last year at Little Ghosts Fest in Toronto. While not strictly a horror publisher, speculative fiction featuring "Earth-focused stories" is the company's primary agenda. With a table showcasing a variety of (mostly) thin paperbacks with intriguing cover art, I couldn't resist picking up a few. Here's a look at two of those releases.

YOU WILL SPEAK FOR THE DEAD

R.A. Busby

This mycology-themed body horror novella is about a lot more than fungi making their home on – and in – the human body, slowly transforming it. It's also a tale of grief, trauma, and their intersection with hoarding as told by a retired small-time clean-up specialist following his last job (the one the story is about). Packed with simple yet profound comments about stuff and its place in people's lives ("Even emptying weeks-old kitchen garbage felt like throwing out my mom in little bits."), there are some deeply poignant moments in this tale of mushrooms that have overtaken a hoarded home in the years after a profound tragedy and how those same mushrooms will go on to overtake a member of the cleaning crew after a second tragedy. A perfect balance of ick and introspection.

THE IMPOSSIBLE RESURRECTION OF GRIEF

Octavia Cade

More of a weird speculative tale, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* offers up a striking premise of its own: as climate change accelerates and more species become extinct, a strange new ailment known as the Grief has begun to plague humanity. Once it infects a person, they deteriorate mentally, losing more and more of themselves until they ultimately commit suicide. Following the death of her friend, the Sea Witch – as she became known after being struck by the Grief – Ruby learns that not everyone who has the Grief follows such a linear road and some of them might, in fact, be dangerous. A meditation on loss – both personal and profound – and the planet we're killing, *TIRoG* raises some interesting ideas about how humanity might respond to such catastrophic environmental changes, but the novella format feels almost too brief to tackle such expansive subject matter and, ultimately, it leaves readers with more questions than answers. Still, it'll make you think…

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com

THE FRIGHT GALLERY

CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

229

THIS MONTH:

THE MENACING MONOCHROME WORLD OF MCMONSTER

A RUE MORGUE COLLECTIBLE

Using a strict greyscale palette in acrylics and watercolour, Joshua McQuary (a.k.a. McMonster) conjures eerie, foreboding, and fantastical realms in his art. Layering deep grey blends against stark high-contrast highlights, he is able to create still, shadow-soaked tableaux straight out of a silent-era horror film.

NAME

Joshua McQuary (McMonster)

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"I grew up in a military family, so I never really had a hometown. I have been living in Portland for the last thirteen years and it is where I call home."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"I use watered-down black acrylics, specifically Culture Hustle's [Black 3.0]. For the white, I use white watercolour paint. My process is laying shades of grey over top of each other, layer after layer, until I get the desired result, then I go in and I add all my highlights in from there. It's a back-and-forth game of applying value and highlights until I get it where I like it."

DEEDS

"In 2017, I won the Pabst Blue Ribbon can competition where my art was featured on millions of cans. In 2021, I self-published my own book called *Sonder*. I've had multiple sold-out solo exhibitions. But lately, I am most proud of my style change and practice. I feel like this is the first year I actually get how to paint, even though I've been doing it full time for seven years."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"Lately, I've been inspired by political chaos, the crushing weight of surviving in a late capitalist hellscape, and the insufferability of humanity; all truly horrifying things."

LAST WORDS

"Be aware of nuances. Not everything is black and white, it's all shades of grey."

RESTING PLACE

Find McMonster on Instagram (@mc__monster) and at his online shop, mcmonsterart.bigcartel.com.

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM @PAIGEREYNOLDSART

A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY STACIE PONDER

NO MATTER WHEN IN THE GREAT EXPANSE OF TIME YOU MAY BE READING THESE WORDS, I can promise you that all things Amityville are buzzing around in the red room between my ears with the power of a thousand and one houseflies. You are free to judge. In fact, I encourage it! The movies are serviceable at best, the books decidedly less so, and all of it is predicated on a bunch of schemers and con artists trying to capitalize on a very real tragedy… and I'm bewitched by all of it. So again: please, judge away.

Look, I can't help myself when it comes to this stuff, owing to reading Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror* at a formative age. I read it, I believed it, I was terrified by it, and I toted an old, tattered paperback (the movie tie-in version, you know, with the demonic-looking house and the devil tail and the flies on it) around for ages like a Bible. The tale of the Lutzes' supposedly evil-drenched 28 days in an unassuming house on Long Island coiled its way into my DNA long ago and there it remains. It's as much a thread in the fabric of my being as my (spoiler) blue eyes and love of the framed photograph of herself that Emma Spool displays in her apartment in *Psycho III*.

Of course, I'm far from alone; once it gurgled up out of the toilet, *The Amityville Horror* franchise wove itself into the threadbare upholstery of pop culture itself. Since then, we've enjoyed (or endured, I suppose) imploding houses, possessed people, possessed floor lamps, sinister dollhouses, bad… uh, clocks? and so much more – and that's just the vintage takes on *Amityville*. These days, opportunistic horror filmmakers have attached the town's (non-copyrightable) name to any old outrageous thing to garner an audience. It fascinates me in an occasionally wondrous, occasionally sad kind of way that there is a throughline from Ronald DeFeo Jr. brutally slaughtering his family to a movie called *Amityville Vibrator*.

As it goes with so many of my finest *cinéma d'horreur* passions, my *Amityville* thoughts and feelings will occasionally reach critical mass, at which point the devil in my mind cries "Get *in*!" and I simply must actively engage with it. I reread that now very tattered Jay Anson paperback or, more often, I watch the original 1979 film, directed by Stuart Rosenberg. And every single time, I have two main takeaways: the first is that James Brolin and Margot Kidder make for one of history's hottest cinematic couples; the second is that I am shocked how it seems to get worse every time I see it, yet my adoration remains unabated. (Again, judge away!)

That's right, I said it – *The Amityville Horror* is turgid, plodding, and nonsensical… and there are so many column-worthy details in there, so many dumb-as-hell gems, that I just can't hate it. There's the formidable character actor Rod Steiger with flies stuck to his face; there's the ubiquitous product placement that allows one to infer that the Lutzes were completely obsessed with La Choy canned Chinese food; there's Jody, the giant demonic purple pig; there is the nun who screeches her car to a halt, then vomits more violently than any frat boy you've ever heard in your life; there's a Satan who speaks in Dr. Seuss-esque rhymes ("Find the well! It's the passage to Hell!"); and heck, there's a well that is a passage to Hell!

It's hard to believe it was ever believed, but I guess that's what happens when you print "A true story" on a book cover and end a film with "This all really super definitely happened, and then the Lutzes left the house."

The residual effects of the *Amityville*-induced terror I felt as a child keep me coming back (as do the dulcet tones of that retching nun), but the residual effects of growing up and learning about the money-grabbing truth of it all keeps me from giving my heart away to its descendants, the other "no, for real, this totally happened" paranormal properties that have proven even more popular than their progenitor. I scoff at 'em, I avoid 'em, and I certainly don't believe in 'em. Perhaps this is because I've grown wiser… or perhaps I'm just holding out until they feature a giant demonic purple pig.

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DEADLY | DANGEROUS | DECENT | DULL | DRIVEL | DOA DEAD ON ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY JESSICA BUCK, ALEX DELLER, DR. BENNY GRAVES, AARON VON LUPTON, AND JEFF SZPIRGLAS

IN A HOUSE OF HEARTBEATS

INSTRUMENTAL

Divination of Dreams

CRUEL NATURE RECORDS

Using post-rock as a dowsing rod, In a House of Heartbeats sets out to find meaning in dreams, nightmares, and altered subconscious states. Acts like Mogwai and From Monument to Masses serve as clear points of reference – by turns dreamy, meditative, and crashingly loud – as tracks glide from FX-assisted prettiness to tremolo-picked intensity. The trio also cites myth, folklore, and art-house cinema as influences, though, as with most instrumental music, such claims are difficult to verify beyond titles that hint at oneiromancy and the byproducts of human-on-demon hanky-panky. For now, the band lingers in the shadow of its influences, but *Divination of Dreams* remains an assured and intriguing debut. With luck, it'll tap a more individual seam as it progresses – perhaps one informed by its home country's status as the birthplace of William Hope Hodgson and the site of Borley Rectory, the most haunted house in Britain. 💀💀💀 **AD**

GREY MALKIN

EXPERIMENTAL

Haunted Lives (A Retrospective)

CRUEL NATURE

This curious compilation might span a decade or so, but Scottish artist Grey Malkin somehow manages to transport the listener to different times and places entirely. Culled from a range of arcane and often highly limited releases, the material drifts effortlessly from *Wicker Man*-style folk to string-laden ambience and haunted electronica. Despite this stylistic variance, the collection makes a lovely, uncanny kind of sense when taken as a whole, with elements beginning to blur and twine much like past and present bleeding together in a piece of weird fiction – something borne out by track titles such as "The Old Gods Sleep Beneath the Fields" and nods to Arthur Machen's classic *The Great God Pan*. As with fellow UK artists like Haress and Reigns, Grey Malkin excels at crafting a sense of the eerie that's exquisitely quiet and subdued, softly eliciting numinous fears and gently scratching at the furthest edges of one's perception. 💀💀💀½ **AD**

DRESSEL AMOROSI

ELECTRONIC

House of Dolls

LIBRARY OF THE OCCULT

Consisting of Valerio Lombardozzi on keys and Federico Amorosi slappin' the bass, the Italian duo of Dressel Amorosi honed its horror chops with 2018's *DeathMetha* and are back to hack away at your eardrums with *House of Dolls*. Opening with eerie spoken words over a crackling static background, the album builds up tension before breaking out into a hypnotic groove that would do Goblin proud – which makes sense, given that Amorosi spent time jamming with Claudio Simonetti and Fabio Frizzi. You can hear the genre influences: "Octagon Tower" has a thudding bass heartbeat that recalls *Dawn of the Dead*, while "Starlight" has a new wave '80s pop vibe that begs for a steamy Pat Benatar vocal. Amorosi's palette of hooks helps to propel each track forward, with Lombardozzi layering in textures and melodic elements, so that *House of Dolls* feels like a genuine team effort tackling '80s Italian *giallo*. 💀💀💀💀 **JS**

THE OTHER

PUNK

Alienated

MASSACRE RECORDS

Germany's The Other may have started out as a Misfits cover band, but it's been carving out its own space in the horror punk scene since the early aughts. This tenth album, *Alienated*, is a well-crafted homage to scary movies, gothic imagery, and sci-fi. Showcasing the many forms of horror punk, *Alienated* switches between breakneck guitar lines, spacey synth, and slow, sinister sing-alongs – sometimes within the same song. The album is strongest in its first half, with "Hellfire" kicking down the door, followed by twelve other aptly-titled tracks such as "I Need Blood" and "I Give You the Creeps." "Hier Sein" is sung completely in German while impassioned power ballad "In the End" gives the album a necessary sense of drama. It's easy to be a music snob and look down on bands who just want it to be Halloween every day, but you'd be missing out on a spooky good time if you did. 💀💀💀💀 **JB**

SUGAR VIRUS

PUNK

Kill the Messenger

SPOOKY HEAVEN RECORDS

Georgia's southern-fried horror punk outfit Sugar Virus is back with a third offering of doom-laden, Danzig-esque, hooky rot 'n' roll. If you know the horror punk formula, you probably know what to expect from lead ghoul Jason Virus, though his voice gets a bubbling kind of distortion that sounds more like Danzig's *6:66 Satan's Child* than *Lucifuge*. Throw in some heavy as hell metal riffs and the occasional Misfits' woah-oh harmony and you've got a fairly satisfying slab of '90s-sounding funeral rock. With tracks like "Blood Beach," "Dracula A.D. 1972," and "Rise of Cthulhu," Sugar Virus' love of old school schlock reads legit, and it's that mentality that fuels this extensive journey into hallucinatory incantations that probably work best if you're a weed smoker. 💀💀💀½ **AVL**

IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS

SOUNDTRACK

John Carpenter and Jim Lang

TERROR VISION

Terror Vision delivers the real deal with this double-LP release of the 1994 collaboration between John Carpenter and Jim Lang. *In the Mouth of Madness* features one of Carpenter's catchiest themes, opening on a montage of horror novels rolling off a printing press. The theme's biggest jolt comes from the badass metal guitars, courtesy of Dave Davies – whose son would later join Carpenter during his late-career run of the *Lost Themes* albums. As with most of Carpenter's work, the soundtrack is built around textural elements meant to establish a general sense of unease. The timbre of the soundscapes reflects those dreamy early-1990s synth presets, making it feel worlds away from the constant tension of earlier works like *Halloween*, while also giving the listener (and the viewer) room to absorb the barrage of images and ideas in Carpenter's Lovecraft-inspired cult favourite. 💀💀💀½ **JS**

PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

WOODBINE

THEME: Vampires and Monsters
FORMAT: Audio Drama
FREQUENCY: Seasonal

From the minds behind the award-winning *Parkdale Haunt* podcast comes another long-form horror fiction show – this time, with more vampires. Embodying a film noir vibe (except, you know, in audio format), *Woodbine* follows the exploits of a small private investigation agency in Toronto. But this isn't an ordinary crime show as the clientele is a little… different: they're shadowy figures, cryptids, mythical creatures, and ghouls. In fact, the agency's owner, Grace, is a vampire herself, and due to a split-second decision made during a violent attack, so is her associate Bea. Together with the help of their himbo assistant Rhys, they solve mysteries for the monsters in their midst, while also attending to the case of who wanted Bea dead and why. This takes them through the city's dark underbelly, exploring a vampiric hierarchy and a society that walks among "normal" people undetected.

Like *Parkdale Haunt*, *Woodbine* features the writing, directing, and production talents of Emily Kellogg and Alex Nursall, which is to say that you should expect more of their snappy scripts, three-dimensional characters, and plenty of biting humour over the course of two seasons thus far. Being both the writers and voice actors for the main characters in the story, Kellogg as Grace and Nursall as Bea crackle with chemistry that draws from their real-life friendship.

Parkdale alum Ian Boddy is also aboard to work his audio magic and provides the voice for Rhys. A professional audio engineer, he creates soundscapes and effects that inspire rich mental imagery and also does his own foley work to make the minutiae come alive. And there's plenty of sound effects required here, depicting all manner of monstrofoolery, such as people turning into bats, mothmen communicating, and sirens calling out from their watery lairs. The expert sound design sets *Woodbine* apart from many shows of its kind, as the listener is never left to figure out what's happening for themselves – they're practically shown.

At its core, *Woodbine* is a love letter to Toronto, referencing real neighbourhoods and landmarks while weaving spooky into the fabric of the city by insinuating that certain bars cater to vampires, or that a minotaur lives in the perpetually confusing underground PATH system. It's also a celebration of the genre, contributing new ideas to vampire lore while showcasing a "monster of the week" – some of which are lesser known, like selkies and *leannán sídhe*. Whether you're drawn to sexy vampires, folklore, crime shows, or just dramatic situations between downtown dwellers, *Woodbine* offers plenty to sink your fangs into.

JESSICA BUCK

NECROSEXUAL

METAL

Road to Rubble

BLACK METAL ARCHIVES

Necrosexual's *Road to Rubble* is tailor-made for a head-banging, liver-ruining rager! This one-man-in-a-no-man's-land ode to sleaze and thrash is just the ticket to jumpstart a life of neck pain. The most interesting part of this release is its commitment to uniquely fusing the bones of metal subgenres. *Road to Rubble* comes out swingin' with "High Times in Hell," a drum premonition segueing into a maelstrom of everything from Exodus to King Diamond. At the risk of sounding cynical, there are too many worship bands that beg the question, "Why don't I just listen to the original?" Necrosexual is not content with languishing love on a single band or style; rather, he gathers body parts and organs from all across the metal globe with a commitment to creating an unstoppable Frankenstein's monster. Overall, there's a powerful evil at the heart of *Road to Rubble*. 666 mph or bust! ☠☠☠½ **DBG**

NECRONOMICON EX MORTIS

METAL

Zombie Blood Nightmare

(INDEPENDENT)

Anyone who's come within biting range of the brain-rotted ghouls that comprise Necronomicon Ex Mortis know how much they love horror, so it comes as no surprise that this latest EP is chock-full of zombies, demons, and deadites. *Zombie Blood Nightmare* cribs its title from *The Video Dead* and pays homage to flicks like *Dawn of the Dead*, *Demons*, and *The Evil Dead* as the band charges giddily through acres of vintage death metal riffing as though its life depended on it. Tracks such as "Lumbering Blood Sucking Freaks" and "Hungry for Brains" do exactly what you'd expect, scoffing wildly at notions of "elevated horror" as they deliver skull-biting thrills, gargled invocations, and solos that fountain forth like blood from a torn jugular. It's as subtle as a splinter of wood to the eyeball and frequently pushes beyond the point of caricature, but it also demonstrates enough charm, energy, and riffcraft to ensure things remain enjoyably… groovy. ☠☠☠ **AD**

DISSENTIENCE

METAL

Kaiju

(INDEPENDENT)

It might open with some delicate arpeggio but make no mistake – *Kaiju* is a monster. The EP follows the story of humanity's encounter with a vast and hostile Lovecraftian presence, from first contact and brutal shock-and-awe through to the inevitably grisly aftermath. The Pennsylvanian quartet cribs from death, thrash, prog, and groove metal as it tells its lurid tale, balancing convoluted complexities, cinematic scope, and shredtacular solos against brute force crunch. While it's hard to decipher Connor Valentin's vocals without the aid of a lyric sheet, the vibe is very much there, and it's easy to conjure mental images of chaos and destruction as tower blocks crumble and endless tentacles squirmingly engulf fragile human meat. All in all, it's a hearty release – recommended for fans of Death, Obscura, Meshuggah, and Metallica's *The Call of Ktulu*, all served up with a side of Toho-Studios-gone-cosmic-horror mayhem. ☠☠☠½ **AD**

FINAL GASP COMES OF AGE

MISFITS CLONES ARE NO STRANGERS TO THE PAGES OF *RUE MORGUE*, AND FOR GOOD REASON – THE PIONEERING HORROR PUNK BAND INSPIRED AN ENTIRE GENERATION OF not-so-young-anymore musicians through its seamless combination of fist-pumping punk anthems and direct references to the cinematic genre we love. And while Boston's Final Gasp takes many cues from Glenn Danzig's post-Misfits work, the band's latest LP, *New Day Symptoms* from Relapse Records, takes the inevitable first step beyond its influences, embracing a newfound maturity in its songwriting.

"It all started with my friend and I hanging out watching YouTube videos of bands playing at the Ritz in New York City in the '80s," explains Final Gasp vocalist and guitarist Jake Murphy. "All of a sudden, the famous bootleg video of Samhain playing at the Ritz in '86 popped up and, as I was watching their set, I just thought it would be so cool if someone did a band like this without making it corny, because bands influenced by Danzig always [tend] to be campy."

True fans of Samhain know that, in addition to the tunes, its greatest quality was its esoteric atmosphere. While sex and Satan were dominant themes, there was an extra something in the obscure occult references and bloodsoaked imagery that made listeners feel there had to be more going on beneath the surface – perhaps revealed when the music was played backward or invoked on Halloween night. Final Gasp has managed to channel a similar arcane energy: a mix of vulnerability, complex emotion, and horror, both real and imagined.

"In the Samhain song 'I Am Misery,' Danzig personifies depression, and I ran with that for the whole *Baptism of Desire* EP," Murphy explains. "It has themes like sleep paralysis that becomes an actual demon or entity. With *Mourning Moon*, there were songs on there that tie into that too. The title track is just about dealing with loss and having that be like a physical form and something that you can't get back."

Lyrically, Murphy takes a broader perspective, drawing from real-life events that evoke a sense of helplessness and regret. Take the album's lead single, "The Apparition," which is inspired by the true story of Ray Boundy, later fictionalized in the 2010 Australian horror film *The Reef*. In 1983, Boundy captained a prawn ship on an expedition with a deckhand and a cook, despite ominous storm warnings. After the boat capsized, the crew made it ashore, only for a fifteen-foot tiger shark to attack the deckhand. Bleeding to death, he urged Boundy to take the cook to safety on a nearby coral island – but the shark struck again, dragging her away as Boundy held onto her hand.

"He just watches the shark shake her a few times and then take her under," Murphy relays. "He eventually makes it to the coral where he was rescued. If he had done things differently, he wouldn't have been in that position. And now you kind of have to live with that forever, you know?"

Those themes of loss and regret feel almost unbearable in a world defined by constant conflict. Horror entertainment, ironically, is one of the few spaces that allows us to process that reality. And like the horror films we love, Final Gasp is here to create something beautiful – even if only to help us digest those cold truths, like the horror-hungry sharks that we are.

PLAY DEAD

NOW PLAYING > FORBIDDEN SOLITAIRE, PATHOLOGIC 3

FORBIDDEN SOLITAIRE

PC

Night Signal Entertainment/Grey Alien Games

For us players of a certain generation, our earliest memories of PC gaming include the notorious *Solitaire*. Automatically shipped with Windows 3.0 alongside *Minesweeper*, the solo card game wormed its way into our hearts as the handiest procrastination tool possible, built right into our work machines. Later on, PC gamers of the '90s would find the occasional spooky gem of a video game on CD-ROMs, often displayed in discount bins or rotating comic book racks at dollar stores. The latest from the devs who brought us *Ancient Enemy* and *Home Safety Hotline*, *Forbidden Solitaire* drops a nostalgic wink at the games of yore, where pixelated blood spatters on otherwise innocent cards were enough to drive concerned parents into a full-on moral panic.

At least, that's part of the game's lore. Players are planted at the Windows desktop screen of Will Roberta, who has just found a rare copy of *Forbidden Solitaire*, notoriously controversial due to its horror and violence. As Will, you must journey into the lo-fi labyrinth of the Forbidden Dungeon in search of immortality, dodging monsters and solving increasingly difficult card-based challenges as you go. A shop will allow you to purchase upgrades in the form of gemstones embedded into your hand (temporalite to allow you to undo a move, for example, or a bloodstone to buff your health). But throughout your horror-fantasy mission, you'll be interrupted by desktop DMs from your sister, Emily, who's been digging up research on the game's initial release, where a spate of violent suicides had it pulled from shelves indefinitely. Are the rumours true? Is *Forbidden Solitaire* really haunted? It's up to you to find out!

Given the popularity of clever deckbuilders right now, *Forbidden Solitaire* could have probably stood on its own as a spooky take on the classic card game, but the meta element elevates it to an experience more akin to *Inscryption* than *Balatro*. The pixelated visuals feel like a warm digital hug from Adventure Soft's 1992 dungeon classic *Waxworks*. My sole nitpick – which I only mention for the sake of the classic *Solitaire* purists out there – is that the card game challenges aren't exactly like the PC *Solitaire* of old. You're matching cards of sequential order to eliminate them, so it's almost more like *Mahjongg*. If that's cool with you, the depths of the *Forbidden Dungeon* await your fresh blood!

ANDREA SUBISSATI

HEADSHOTS: : INNOVATIVE META GAME-IN-GAME FORMAT, '90s NOSTALGIA FACTOR IS DEAD-ON
MISFIRES: NOT QUITE THE SAME *SOLITAIRE* WE PLAYED INSTEAD OF STUDYING FOR OUR ALGEBRA EXAM

PATHOLOGIC 3

PC, PS5, Xbox X/S

Ice-Pick Lodge/HypeTrain Digital

A couple hours into *Pathologic 3*, players are offered the following dialogue option: "This town... no one can give a single straight answer. A town of impossible objects and vague metaphor." It's a near-perfect summation of what to expect from this Russian psychological horror game.

Most simply, *Pathologic 3* is the story of a doctor sent to a rural town to investigate rumours of an immortal man, only to arrive to find him deceased and the community on the cusp of annihilation from a deadly plague. As the last proper doctor in town, the place desperately needs your help. Of course, this brief summation leaves out the fact that this community is jammed full of odd, potentially shady characters as well as well-meaning ones who may end up being even more dangerous. Then there's the unusual architecture, superstitions, and folklore, and the deaths that may actually be murders (or not deaths at all). In the shoes of the main character, players traipse through the various districts, interrogating folks, performing scientific experiments, issuing health decrees, avoiding the evil entity who stalks the most plague-ridden areas, and basically doing whatever it takes to stop the spread of the contagion (while also getting to the bottom of the town's secrets). Oh, and did I mention, there's *time travel*?

Time is a seriously fiddly thing here and players must move back and forth throughout the twelve-day timespan that comprises the game's narrative in order to solve mysteries, prevent murders, apply new learning to old problems, undo critical errors, etc. It's a mechanic that feels a bit overwhelming when first introduced but turns out to be one of the coolest facets of the game. And finally, while doing all that aforementioned science, investigation, and town management stuff, players must also keep an ever-watchful eye on their Apathy/Mania meter. Dip too far into the former and you may suddenly find yourself thinking about eating your gun.

Yes, *Pathologic 3* has a lot going on, but it all adds up to something pretty damned engaging. So, grab your kit and get doctoring.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADSHOTS: DECREE SYSTEM; TIME TRAVEL; THE STRANGE, SLOW-TO-UNFOLD STORY
MISFIRES: THE FIREARM MECHANICS CAN BE FRUSTRATING, SOMEWHAT CONFUSING INVENTORY SYSTEM

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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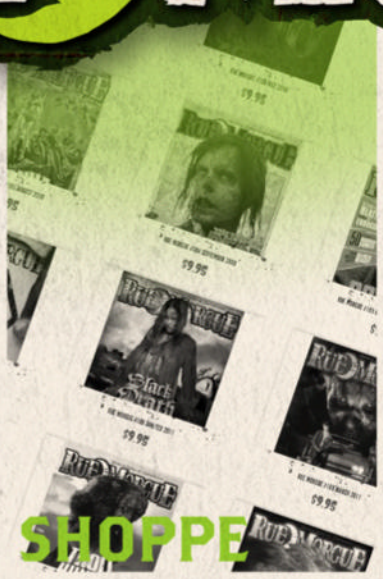

THEY SAY THAT THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO INSULATE YOURSELF AGAINST A SCARY MOVIE IS TO COVER YOUR EARS. BUT DOES THAT ADAGE STILL RING TRUE IN THE MODERN ERA? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO DUKE IT OUT!

IS SOUND SCARIER THAN VISUALS IN A HORROR MOVIE?

YES!

JEFF SZPIRGLAS

"Try watching the shower scene in Psycho *with the sound turned off for a severely diminished impact."*

VS

NO!

MAGILL FOOTE

"When it comes to horror, it's the visuals that make it personal."

WHILE A GREAT MANY HORROR MOVIES CREATE BROODING VISUAL ATMOSPHERES, IT'S THEIR SOUNDTRACKS THAT REALLY DELIVER THE GOODS. Sound doesn't even require visuals to scare and shock audiences. Before televisions were in every home, radio drama ruled the airwaves, and that's when horror and suspense truly flourished with the likes of *Suspense*, *The Shadow*, and *Lights Out* (plus, let's not forget how Orson Welles' 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds* terrified the nation).

As soon as synchronous sound came to film, filmmakers began to experiment with the possibility of using acoustics to amplify scares. Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) creates a hypnotic auditory space where dialogue is sometimes half-heard, and it's driven by Wolfgang Zeller's menacing score. Music plays a major role in shaping these films, both the scores themselves, as well as their placement and spotting. Try watching the shower scene in *Psycho* with the sound turned off for a severely diminished impact, or just about any scene from *Jaws* without the steady two-note ostinato, just one semitone apart. Soundtracks can literally unnerve people, as in the use of infrasounds (frequencies so low that they are more felt than heard) in films such as *Hereditary*.

Even the cornerstone of most modern horror movies – the good old-fashioned jump scare – wouldn't function without sound and doesn't even need something monstrous leaping towards you to work. Consider Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942), a movie in which – spoiler alert – we don't see any cat people per se, save for some suggestive shadows. The film's auditory *pièce de résistance* comes halfway through, when Alice (Jane Randolph) walks down a deserted street in high heels, pursued by an unseen follower. We hear the steady click-thump of Alice's footfalls, along with a second set clicking along behind her. For a heart-wrenching 90 seconds, we listen to these two sets of footsteps quicken, until Alice breaks out into a run. Then, in the darkness, we hear a feral feline growl that crescendos into the hiss of the brakes of a city bus pulling right up to Alice. Our hearts are in our throats. Our popcorn is on the floor. They say you can close your eyes to scares, but you can never close your ears.

GROWING UP, MY WIFE USED TO BE SUPER CREEPED OUT BY HER GRANDFATHER'S PAINTING OF AN EERIE-LOOKING MONK WITH A GAUNT FACE and unnaturally long fingers; so much so, that the painting had to be stashed in a closet until she was old enough to stand looking at it. That story always reminds me of the 2017 adaptation of Stephen King's *It*, which included a scene (not in the novel) where Stanley Uris is menaced by the warped, pointy-toothed woman from a painting hanging in his father's office. There's something relatable in that scene about the kind of dread you got as a child looking at a creepy image, and it was so effective that King himself called up director Andy Muschietti to say, "I fucking love the woman in the painting, it scared the shit out of me!" The story of *It* is all about childhood fears, and I posit that the visuals of horror are the bedrock of the genre's ability to frighten and unsettle us.

Ask your friends what scared them most and I bet they will tell you about a terrifying image they saw when they were far too young: maybe it's the iconic illustrations of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, maybe it's the Nazi officer Toht's face being melted off in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, or maybe they're like me and the green, glowing eyes of G'mork, the dire wolf from *The NeverEnding Story*, burned themselves into their impressionable childhood retinas. When it comes to horror, it's the visuals that make it personal. For me, there's nothing scarier than the effect of a movie monster looking through the screen into your soul. Whether it's Norman Bates' deranged smirk at the end of *Psycho* or Donald Sutherland pointing and wailing at the end of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the barrier between reality and fiction is thin enough for the terror to be directed straight at you. It's the images that burn themselves into the brain, and the reason we're watching movies in the first place.

LAST ISSUE'S WINNER
AS VOTED BY YOU ON FACEBOOK

IS *A SERBIAN FILM* STILL INDEFENSIBLE AS A FORM OF ART?

NO! 39% | 61% YES!

A SERBIAN FILM IS STILL INDEFENSIBLE AS A FORM OF ART!

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

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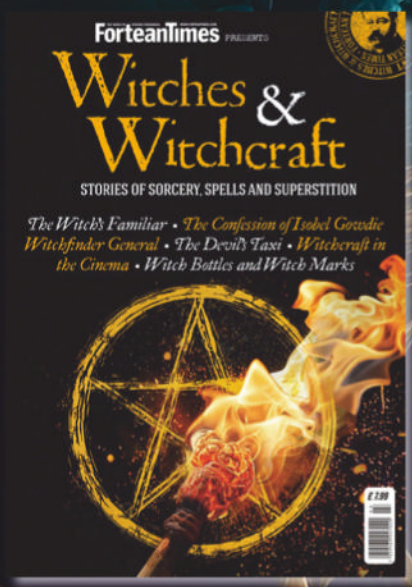
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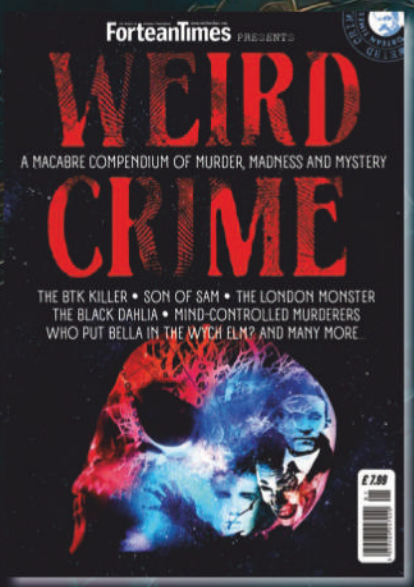
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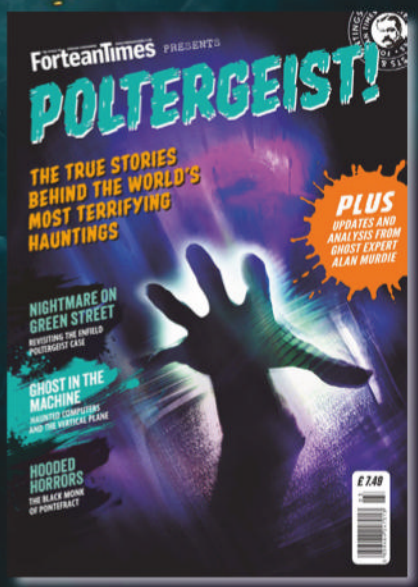

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